

32. Sin, Spirituality, Connectedness to Mitzvahs

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We all need spirituality. We all need to be connected to others and to G-d. If we sin, we destroy our links with others and, therefore, become miserable. We feel alienated. That, of course, is what we learn from the story of Adam and Eve. The rabbis teach us Rosh Hashonna celebrates Adam and Eve's creation; they also teach us that Adam and Eve sinned on Rosh Hashonna and were forgiven on Rosh Hashonna.

After Adam and Eve sinned, they immediately felt ashamed and wanted to hide. They felt that they were no longer worthy of G-d's love and care and protection. The Torah tell us, "And they heard the voice of G-d manifesting itself in the Garden toward evening, and Adam and his wife hid before G-d in the midst of the trees of the Garden, and Adam said, 'I heard Your voice in the Garden, and I was afraid because I am naked, so I hid.'" The rabbis explain Adam did not refer only to his physical nakedness but also to his inner sense of nakedness. He now felt he was naked of self-respect. He could no longer look, so to speak, G-d in the eye, and, therefore, had to hide. He had to sever his connections with G-d, and when G-d asked him, "Who told you that you were naked? From the tree that I commanded you not to eat from did you eat?" Adam did what all men and women have been doing from time immemorial:

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instead of taking responsibility for his sin, he had to blame somebody else.

Adam said, "The woman that You gave me, she gave me of the fruit of the tree and I ate." In other words, he said, it is not my fault that I sinned, G-d; it is Your fault because You gave me this woman and the fault is hers. She, of course, said it was not her fault. After all, G-d had not spoken to her directly. She had only heard about this prohibition of eating the fruit from Adam. It was the snake who pushed her against the tree and nothing happened. Naturally, the snake had an excuse, too. Immediately when we sin, we do things that are beneath human dignity. We blame other people and by blaming other people, we alienate ourselves from G-d and from other people. We destroy our sense of spirituality. We need to be connected to G-d and to others to have a spiritual life. When we sin, we make it so much harder to have a spiritual life. G-d still calls out to us, and He reminds us that we can still have a spiritual life.

That's why in the prayers that we repeat over and over again on the High Holidays, "Adoshem, Adoshem...", we mention G-d's name twice because even after we have sinned, G-d wants us to have a relationship with Him. We try to hide, but we know that we must have a link to Him. Unless we have a link to

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Him, we are not going to be able to make it in the world.

That's why we all come to shul on Rosh Hashonna and Yom Kippur. We need to have a relationship with G-d. Many Jews have tried to claim that Judaism is only an ethnic identity; but it is not. We are both a people and a religion. We need spirituality. We need to know that what we do counts and that G-d is counting on us. We know that Judaism allows us to feel and believe that we are important and needed. We can suppress spirituality for a little while, but it will spring up again; if we do not fill our people's spiritual needs by teaching them Judaism, they will find it someplace else. We can all rationalize and claim we do not need religion or spirituality, but we all know that is nothing more than a self-deception. The problem is when you rationalize and deceive yourself, you cut yourself off from G-d, and you further cut yourself off from your fellow man. We all need to come within G-d's presence.

That is what the High Holidays are about. G-d is close to us and He is extending, so to speak, His hand to us. He is asking us to come and meet Him, to re-establish once again His link with us. If we fail to do so, eventually we

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In the Torah portion Haazinu, we have Moshe's final poem to the Jewish people. It talks about how G-d created the world, and how He chose the Jewish people to be His partner in perfecting the world, and how the Jewish people are going to grow fat and rich and turn to idols. They are then going to be exiled from the land of Israel. Moshe tells us this poem so that after we are exiled, we will know why we were exiled, and it will give us hope because we know that we will come back, as the poem states. In the middle of the poem, it says, "And I had said, 'I will scatter them.'" The word scatter them is a very unusual word.

The Sforno says that this means that only a corner of the Jewish people will remain, that the rest will be wiped out, that there will be a saving remnant who will eventually come back to the land of Israel. We can all see the imagery of the Holocaust here. The Ramban said that this is actually a blessing, not a curse, that G-d will scatter the Jewish people so their enemies will never be able to destroy them. We know that anti-Semitism is rife in the world. In France especially now (Two weeks after I gave this sermon, 70 synagogues were burned in France.) there is anti-Semitism. In Russia and the Arab countries, even in the United States, there is some anti-Semitism now. Because we are scattered, our enemies cannot destroy us all. Abarbanel says that the Jewish people will be gathered into Israel, but they will be treated as if they are scattered so they will not be able to be destroyed. In fact, the Imam of the Elaksa Mosque said in one of his sermons that the reason G-d brought the Jews back to Israel in our time is so they can be destroyed all at once. This, we know, will not be because G-d has promised that the Jewish people will be eternal. It does not mean we will not suffer and suffer huge losses, but we will still remain as a Jewish people, recognizable

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forever.

We know, though, that the Jewish people have to act morally and justly and correctly. Unless we do so, we will suffer and not be the light unto the nations that we should be. In the sixth line of this poem, which we repeat many times in our prayers, we say, "G-d is a faithful G-d without iniquity, righteous, and upright is He." Rabbi Naftali Berlin, in his commentary on the Torah Omek HaDover, says that there is a big difference between a Tzadek and a Yosher. A Tzadek is a righteous person. He does good things, and a Hosid is a person who is extremely pious, but both a Tzadek and Hosid are not always a Yosher. It means they deal correctly with everyone. They do not demand that everyone agree with them on everything. The reason the rabbis say the second Temple was destroyed was because of senseless hatred, which came because the righteous and the pious would consider everyone who did not agree with them as a heretic and strike out against them. This is not being a Yosher. A Yosher treats everyone with respect and dignity, even those with whom he disagrees. He also sympathizes and empathizes with their position, not to the extent, of course, of destroying his own position. He, though, always deals fairly with everyone, even those who criticize him.

Unfortunately, in our day we find many people who are righteous and pious, but who do not treat everyone with the respect and dignity they deserve. There are also those who go overboard in their sympathy and empathy for other people's positions. We see that today

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when Jews are more empathetic and sympathetic to Arab positions than to our own positions. This is suicide. It reminds me of those Jews in 1933 who thought Hitler was right, so they committed suicide. We have to be Yosher, but not to the extent of giving up our own positions. We need to be Yosher so that we can remain in the land of Israel so that we will not be scattered, but we cannot be so empathetic that we exile ourselves.

I am reminded of the story of a woman who went to her doctor and said, "You have to do something about my husband. He thinks he is a refrigerator." The doctor said, "Many people have illusions." She said, "You don't understand, doctor. My husband sleeps with his mouth open, and the light keeps me awake." We should not empathize with another person's illusions and bad theories so much that we believe them and act accordingly. May we all act righteous, piously, and with Yosher so the Mashiach will come quickly in our day. Amen.

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are going to turn on each other. After Adam and Eve did Teshuva, after they took responsibility for their sins, they were able to once again reconcile each to the other.

That's why it says in the Torah right after the sentence, "Adam knew his wife and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain," that Eve said, "I have acquired a man with G-d." In other words, she knew that now she had a husband. She knew that she could forgive her husband for his faults because she also had faults. We all know that if we look at our spouse and demand that he or she be perfect, we have to be perfect, too. We know that we are not perfect. Therefore, since we can forgive ourselves, we should also be able to forgive our spouses. We also have to realize that as long as a person admits his or her errors and is trying to establish a link with G-d, then that person is worthy of respect and dignity.

On Rosh Hashonna we say this openly. We say, "From the depths I called out to You, G-d." Why is a person in the depths after all? He is in the depths because he has not been all that he could be. He knows that he could be so

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much more. He knows that he could have done so much more to fulfill his potential. We know that as long as we admit our errors and try again, G-d will bring us close to Him. Judaism states that man must first be moral before he can get close to G-d, but it is a Jewish heresy to say that all man has to be is moral. This is a heresy because each of us has a psychological and spiritual need to get closer to G-d. If this need is thwarted, we are miserable and unhappy, and we will try to fulfill this need no matter what. Some of our people will look to eastern or western or made-up religions, but this is all unnecessary because Judaism is about linking man to G-d. Many people forget about that. Many people forget that the purpose of Judaism is to allow man to get close to G-d. For so long in our community, we have failed to speak about G-d. It seems hard to understand why we have failed to speak about G-d. This failure to speak about G-d goes all the way from the ultra orthodox to the ultra reform. Perhaps we are afraid that people will stop being moral if we talk too much about G-d. As Judaism says, you first have to be moral before you can reach out to G-d because G-d will not heed you or your prayers and will not want to establish a relationship with you if you act immorally. But once we have established that we want to live a moral life, G-d reaches out to us and

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says, "Come to Me." We need to establish our link with G-d.

Unfortunately, many people do not realize that. Certainly, you can do mitzvahs without thinking that they are avenues to G-d but the mitzvahs lose their meaning. They lose their vibrancy and become mechanical things. When mitzvahs become mechanical things, most people cannot observe them. Most people cannot see any sense in them if they are only mechanical.

This is what we learn in the Torah portion, Haazinu, Moshe's closing poem to the Jewish people, in which he speaks about how the Jewish people will desert G-d because they thought all they needed was material prosperity. "Yeshurun (another name for the Jewish people) became fat and kicked and it deserted G-d and became contemptuous with the rock of its salvation." The Jewish people thought they could get along without G-d. As the poem goes along, it tells us, this will lead to terrible tragedies because if the Jewish people desert the G-d of their fathers, they will quickly embrace false gods which will lead them to destruction. When we desert the mitzvahs, we lose our avenues to G-d. We must realize that keeping Shabbat and keeping kashruth are ways to connect us

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to G-d. Kashruth teaches us the importance of life. When you eat meat, you are taking a life. True, not a human life but an animal life, and you need G-d's permission to do that. The mitzvahs refine us and make us better people. They allow us to develop our spiritual nature and to connect with man and to connect with G-d. That is the purpose of mitzvahs.

Jewish learning allows us to understand how the mitzvahs connect us to G-d and how they are not just mechanical things. True, when we do mitzvahs between man and man, giving charity, it does not make any difference what our intentions are, whether we have a good intention or bad intention. After all, the poor are still being helped, so it makes no difference. When we want to get close to G-d, we have to understand the mitzvahs; otherwise, they will appear to be just a sham and a fake, and they will never allow us to achieve the goal of the mitzvahs. Their goal is to get us close to G-d.

On this holiday of Rosh Hashonna, we say that G-d moves from the seat of mercy to the seat of judgment when He hears the blowing of the shofar. Why should that be? After all, the shofar is usually an instrument denoting

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punishment. In the Talmud, one of the tools that a Beis Din had to have was a shofar because it was used to announce that a person was to be shunned by the community. The shofar was a sign of judgment, not mercy. When Joshua blew the shofar before the Walls of Jericho, it was a sign of judgment. When Deborah had the shofar blown against the Tribe of Reuben because they did not come to aid her when she fought the Canaanites, it was a sign of judgment. So how can the Talmud teach us that when we blow the shofar, it is a sign of mercy, not a sign of judgment?

The rabbis answer by telling us that it depends upon who is blowing the shofar. If the shofar is being blown against you, then it is a sign of judgment, but if you are blowing the shofar against yourself, if you are calling out from the depths to G-d, if you are telling G-d: "Listen, I am sorry for any bad thing I did that sullied my relationship with You and with other human beings; and I will try to do better. I am reaching out." Then the shofar is a sign of mercy. The call of the shofar is the cry of a man who wants to re-establish relationships with G-d and with his family and with all those people whom he has wronged. Rosh Hashonna is the holiday on which we re-establish relationships because

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relationships are essential for spirituality. Why do we come to shul on Rosh Hashonna? After all, we could pray at home, but we know it is not the same. We all come to shul to feel connected to the Jewish people, to be connected to our friends and neighbors, and especially to be connected to G-d. When we are connected to G-d, we attain a certain wholeness and elevation which allows us to cope with life, to overcome its problems, to realize that we are important and we are doing important things. We need to be close to G-d. We all need G-d's help. We all need to feel we are doing His work, and we need His help to make the right decisions in life. We need G-d's help to fulfill our job as His partner in creation. We need G-d's help to allow us to connect to our family and to help us admit when we are wrong. Mitzvahs are an avenue to spirituality. Mitzvahs allow us to get closer to G-d. The more we understand about the mitzvahs, the closer we can get to G-d. That is why Jewish learning is so important.

May we all during the coming year understand more and more about the mitzvahs so we can do them with greater understanding, so we will get closer to G-d. May this allow us all to have richer spiritual lives to feel connected to

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G-d and connected to others; so that truly we can do G-d's work on this earth with a full heart.

On behalf of my wife and family, I wish you all a Gemar Chaseema Tova, a New Year in which we will all feel uplifted because we will know that even if we slip, we can always reconnect ourselves to our family, to our fellow human beings, and to G-d if we will but admit our error and try to do as many mitzvahs as we can. Amen.