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Tziyon *ben Azriel a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Don't Forget the Truth

PARSHAS VAYECHI 5778

One of the most well-known passages from the Rambam's *Yad Ha'chazakah* features his depiction of the message of the Shofar. As he writes: "Even though blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is simply a function of a Torah directive, it does contain a message by way of allusion; and it says: 'Awaken you sleepers from your sleep, and you who slumber, emerge from your slumber; examine your deeds, return and repent, and remember your Creator – those of you who forget the truth amongst the vanities of the day and who stumble the entire year in vanity and emptiness, which does not help and will not save...'" (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 3:4).

Parshah of Life

Now, this stirring rendition is perhaps most familiar to us for the Rambam's linkage of *teshuvah* to the shofar, as he portrays the shofar blasts as calls to repentance. But a closer look reveals that he seems to introduce yet another element to this exhortation: namely, his emphasis on discerning truth from fiction, as he addresses "those of you who **forget the truth amongst the vanities of the day.**"

The significance of these words of the Rambam might perhaps be better appreciated against the backdrop of this week's *parshah* which, as we shall see, echoes a similar idea. One of the main themes dealt with in this *parshah* is the passing of Ya'akov. It delineates the various blessings he sought to impart as his life neared its end and in fact deals at some length with his actual passing, the extensive burial arrangements, etc. In short, it may be said that the primary subject of the *parshah* centers around death. And yet, interestingly enough, the very name of the *parshah* is just the opposite: "*Vayechi* – And he lived."

Actually, we find that this phenomenon occurs in connection with one other *parshah*. When contemplating Parshas Chayei Sarah, many people automatically conjure up in their minds a picture of a tomb in the city of Chevron – and for good reason. This *parshah* opens with the passing of Sarah Imeinu, as well as Avraham's involvement in eulogizing her and procuring the celebrated burial site of *Me'aras Ha'machpeilah*. The *parshah* even closes with the passing of Avraham Avinu himself. Once again, however, the *parshah* is known by a title that conveys a message of life: "*Chayei Sarah* – The **Life** of Sarah."

Remarking on this irony, the *Ozna'im LaTorah (Bereishis 23:1)* explains that, in fact, the arrangement is quite deliberate. Herein is conveyed a most vital life-lesson, as we are reminded where "true life" really lies – not in This World, but, of course, in the World to Come. As the *Mesilas Yesharim* expounds so eloquently in his classic introductory chapter: "Man was created solely in order to delight in Hashem and derive pleasure from the radiance of His Divine Presence, for this is the true delight and the greatest enjoyment from all forms of enjoyment that could be attained. And the true place of this enjoyment is the World to Come... In truth... no intelligent person can believe that the purpose of man's creation was for his situation in This World, for... who is it that attains true joy and tranquility in This World? ...Not one in a thousand will find that This World will provide for him abundant pleasure and true tranquility... Rather, man was created for his situation in the World to Come... But the path through which one reaches this area of our desire runs through This

World... and it is the *mitzvos* that are the means whereby a person attains this ends... Therefore, a person was placed first in This World in order that – through these means that are only available to him here – he may enter into... the World to Come, to delight there in the good that he acquired through (the *mitzvos*)...”

Making the *Cheshbon* (Calculation)

The issue and challenge that we face is that this is precisely the main strategy of the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination): *to make us forget this great truth*. Indeed, this is the only reason that a person ever stumbles into sin or neglects the fulfillment of a mitzvah – because he confuses his priorities and temporarily grants primacy to This World, while losing his awareness of Olam Haba.

Thus it is that Chazal urge us to combat the false narrative promoted by the *yetzer hara*. They provide us with a formula that guarantees we will hold onto the proper perspective. As the Mishnah states (*Avos 2:1*):

הוּי מְחַשֵּׁב הַפְּסֵד מִצְוָה כְּנֶגֶד שְׂכָרָהּ, וְיִשְׁכַּר עֲבֵרָה כְּנֶגֶד הַפְּסֵדָהּ.

“Calculate the loss accrued from a mitzvah against its reward and the gain accrued from a transgression against its loss.”

It is only to the extent that a person loses sight of this simple calculation that he is able to come to any sin. In a fairly stark pronouncement, Chazal state elsewhere: *אין אדם עובר עבירה* – “A person does not commit a transgression unless a spirit of temporary insanity enters within him” (*Sotah 3a*). For as long as one indeed takes the time to make the simple calculation outlined by the Mishnah in *Avos*, it is virtually impossible to make the wrong choice. Such is the outcome that any measured comparison between This World and the Next should yield. When one contemplates the enormity of the potential for eternal reward or retribution (such as the case may be), all other considerations should immediately fall by the wayside.

The *Mesilas Yesharim* also echoes this point, as he accentuates the sheer delight of cleaving to Hashem in the Afterlife: “True and complete perfection manifests itself solely through cleaving to Him, may He be blessed. It was to this that David Hamelech referred when he said (*Tehillim 73:28*): ‘And as for me – it is closeness to G-d that is goodness for me.’ For it is only this that constitutes (true) goodness. Anything else aside from this that people consider to be good, in truth is nothing but futility and perverse emptiness...”

This, in any event, seems to be the intent of the Rambam as well. It is only a result of confusing one’s priorities – granting primacy to This World over the World to Come – and neglecting to focus on Chazal’s calculation that leads a person to choose poorly in the first place. And so, the formula for repentance is precisely that: to awaken from the slumber in which a person becomes preoccupied with the affairs of This World to the neglect of the World to Come. The Rambam thus directs “those of you who **forget the truth amongst the vanities of the day**” to recall where true life really lies. In this way a person can fully return to Hashem.

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