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TOURO TORAH

• Lander College for Women • Divrei Torah Newsletter • Teves •

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Removing My Cloak of Physicality

By Chaya Tessler

There are a few times each year that we fast, one of which is *Assarah Be-Teves*. With each fast, we are told to learn about what happened on that date in the past, to mourn the tragedy that took place then, and to do some form of *teshuvah* in accordance with this. With each fast, I find myself asking the same questions: What is the purpose of the fast? Can't we just dedicate the day to thinking about that certain event and idea, without the 'not-eating' part? Doesn't the fact that I am hungry, tired, and thirsty simply serve to distract me from thinking about what I am supposed to? This year, I read an article by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld in which he answers this question. In it, he tells a story that happened to his own teacher, Rabbi Yochanan Zweig.

Rabbi Zweig once went to visit a woman in the hospital who was in the final stages of a terminal illness. He had been dreading going, wondering what on earth he could say to this woman that would be of any help. After all, there was nothing he could do to fix her situation. When he got there, he was astonished to find that she was not in need of any encouragement. In fact, more than just accepting her situation, she was *happy* with it. Rabbi Zweig asked her how she could not only overcome the sadness of her situation, but actually be happy about what was happening to her. She answered, "Before I became sick, I had a good life and was content. Now, everything I have has come to mean so much more to me, and I am so much more appreciative of who I am and what G-d has given me. As wonderful as my life was before my illness, I could have lulled myself through the whole thing and never found out who I am inside. Now that I have nothing in life, I am able to see what is truly important to me. It is much better that I am going to return my soul to my Creator the way it is now."

When we fast, we experience something similar, though on a much smaller and more temporary scale. In our day-to-day lives, we become comfortable, and it is easy to live passively, without truly questioning what is important to us. But it is crucial that we step out of our comfort zone in order to clarify our perspective. When we fast, we lose that outer cushioning of physicality, and it becomes much easier to look inside ourselves, at what counts. When we deny the physical, we recognize that our essence is spiritual, and we become more capable of

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tapping into that spirituality. With this newfound clarity, we are better able to approach the day with the proper mindset. We are better able to focus on what the day means to us and in which ways we can properly repent and grow. May Hashem help us all to be able to fast well this year, to look within ourselves and be able to see how to take the next step in our *avodas Hashem*.

A *Berachah* to Children

By Rebecca Smith

Sefer Bereishis concludes with *Yaakov* bestowing *berachos* upon the *shevatim*. Just as *Yaakov* blessed *Efraim* and *Menashe* with the powerful *berachah* of security and prosperity, it has become a widely performed *minhag* for parents to bless their children that they emulate this pair. But why were *Efraim* and *Menashe* chosen to epitomize what Jewish children should be like? Why were the *avos*, presumably the greatest of all individuals cited in the Torah, not chosen as the models?

Efraim and *Menashe* were distinct in that they were brought up in a time post-*Lavan* and pre-exile, a time of relative peace. Many other great leaders in *Kellal Yisrael* endured much suffering in their lives. The unique choice of blessing that our children be like *Efraim* and *Menashe* demonstrates the hope that our children will live in a peaceful environment.

However, even while living in relative peace, *Efraim* and *Menashe* found themselves in an environment incongruent with Torah values and separate from the support system of their extended family. From birth, they were raised among Egyptians, which forced them to develop mental barriers to prevent the surrounding immoral philosophies from penetrating their essences. Thus, this *berachah* epitomizes the hope that, throughout our long exile, while we Jews may find ourselves in environments which threaten our values, we remain unwavering and, even thriving, in our *emunah* and *avodas Hashem*.

It is interesting to note that *Efraim* and *Menashe* were the first to have the special sibling dynamic they displayed. In the cases of the sets of brothers preceding them, from *Kayin* and *Hevel* to *Yaakov* and *Esav*, hostility and sibling rivalries were standard. *Efraim* and *Menashe* defied this trend, and therefore became worthy of being role models for the following generations. Even *Yaakov's* outward display of favoritism through switching his hands did not prevent the love and harmony the two brothers felt for one another. It is thus fitting for parents to bless their children with one of the greatest sources of *nachas* – sibling love and loyalty.

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Yaakov realized *Efraim* and *Menashe* were ideal role models, because they stood strong against outward influence as well as remained strong amongst themselves in their own personal lives. Accordingly, he chose to bless them, raising their status in a show of appreciation for their efforts. Through this *berachah*, they were elevated from 'just' *Yosef's* sons to the level of *shevatim*, as well as an inspiration to all of *Kellal Yisrael*. Furthermore, *Efraim* and *Menashe*, in reaching such high levels in these areas, demonstrated that great spiritual accomplishment can be achieved by anyone. This serves as an inspiration to children in every generation, showing that no level of spirituality is beyond their reach. These brothers are true paradigms of so much of what we hope and pray that all Jewish children live up to. May we feel all dimensions of their *berachos* upon us.

(Based on *shiurim* by Rabbi Shmuel Goldin and Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, heard on YUTorah)

Your Way, My Way, *and* the Highway

By **Rochie Pacht**

"T'was the night of the *geulah*, and in every single *shtiebel*, sounds of *Torah* could be heard coming from every kind of *yeedle*..." So begins Rabbi Yitzchak Feigenbaum's poem, which tells the tale of *Mashiach* coming at last, but being rejected by the various *frum* communities based on the hat he was wearing. Though this poem is written humorously, unfortunately, it is no joke. Nowadays, the amount of tension between the different groups in the Orthodox world is a tremendous problem. But how can we possibly find a harmonious solution? If our *derech* is the correct one, then wouldn't "acceptance" of other groups be synonymous with sitting back and

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allowing others to be misguided? I recently heard a beautiful answer to this seeming paradox from Rabbi Yisrael Reisman.

As we near the end of *Sefer Bereishis*, the focus of the *parshiyos* begins to switch from the *avos* to the twelve *shevatim*. Like the *avos* before them, each of the *shevatim* had a unique personality, unique strengths and weaknesses, and a unique way of serving and

connecting to Hashem. Yet, while every member of *Kellal Yisrael* is a descendant of all three of the *avos*, we each belong to only one specific *shevet*. In today's day and age, thousands of years after ten of the *shevatim* were sent into exile, it is extremely rare for a person to know which *shevet* he or she is descended from. Thus, although it is common knowledge that each of us technically belongs to one *shevet*, it is usually viewed as trivia, having very little to do with our daily lives.

However, Rabbi Reisman points out that this is not the case. Although the actual *shevet* each person belongs to may be lost knowledge, the *concept* that *Kellal Yisrael* is made up of *shevatim* is an integral *yesod* (foundation) in *yiddishkeit*. Why should this be so? Because every *shevet* is different. This is a concept far more complex than it appears. In the same way that the

avos are the forefathers of *Kellal Yisrael* – their *middos* provide the spiritual genetic material for their descendants and their actions are “*simanim*” that enable us to follow in their footsteps – each of the *shevatim* is the spiritual forefather of his individual *shevet*. *Reuven* lost the *bechorah* on behalf of all his future descendants. How is this fair? Why should tens of thousands of people lose the *bechorah* because of what their ancestor once did in a moment of haste? Because *Reuven* provides every one of his descendants with their spiritual DNA, he creates the nature of his *shevet* through his actions. When one of the *shevatim* passes a test, he is enabling every future member of his *shevet* to do the same, and if he fails a test, the opposite holds true. Each of the *shevatim* molds the individual *derech* and character of his *shevet*.

Because of this, we end up with a *Kellal Yisrael* that is broken into thirteen unique groups. Rabbi Reisman is careful to point out that, “The *penimius* is the same – *ahavas Hashem, yiras Hashem, mitzvos*. But the approach, the personality, and the *techunos hanefesh* are different for each one.” The understanding that this is how Hashem intends it to be is truly eye-opening. Nowadays, we view it as an anomaly that Orthodox Jewry is broken into so many different sects. In our minds, the way it is *intended* to be is that everybody should be exactly the same. What we

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mean by this notion is that everybody should be exactly as we are. We think that it is a mistake, a corruption of the natural order, that there are so many different groups all identifying as Orthodox Jews.

In fact, the opposite is true. *Kellal Yisrael* is supposed to be made up of different groups. There is *not* one uniform way of serving Hashem correctly. When we look at the differences between the different *hashkafos* today, we forget that throughout history, *Torah* giants

have had drastically different approaches to serving Hashem. *Hillel* and *Shammai*, *Rav* and *Shmuel*, the *avos* themselves – each had a unique way! Some connected to Hashem through *chessed*, some through *gevurah*, some through *emes*. Some spent their lives surrounded by people, while others sought out solitude and spent their days in introspection. Some were experts in secular fields as well – astronomy, medicine, mathematics – while others learned only Torah. They excelled in different *middos*, had different personalities, *hashkafos*, and *halachic* opinions. And this is a good thing.

The problem today is not that the different groups exist. The problem is that we *view it as a problem*. If I think that you are doing the wrong thing by serving Hashem in a different way than I am, it is only natural for me to look down upon you, to pity you, or, perhaps, to resent you. After all, you are wrong, and I am right. This makes you inferior and me superior. When we look at one another with such a mentality, it is only natural for there to be bitterness and discord between us. Indeed, looking around at the *frum* world today, it seems clear that this is the situation.

However, if I acknowledge that you are doing the *right* thing by serving Hashem in a different way than I am, and I am doing the right thing by serving Hashem in a different way than you, then the two of us can live together in harmony, each recognizing and respecting the fact that we are both right. We may be doing different things, but our goals – *ahavas Hashem, yiras Hashem*, and *mitzvos* – are aligned. With this understanding, there is no need for resentment and no need for discord. Feeling threatened by the other equally legitimate *hashkafah* is not only harmful, it is unnecessary. When it comes down to it, we are not in opposition. We are simply taking different paths to the same destination.

With Us in the Darkness

By Shaindle Goodwin

After saying goodbye to the eight flickering flames in our windows, what message can we take away with us, what leftover light and warmth can we carry with us through the rest of the dark, cold winter? What about *Channukah* can be applied year-round?

In *Maseches Shabbos*, *Chazal* ask "What is *Channukah*?" They answer that it is an eight-day period during which we neither deliver eulogies nor fast. *Chazal* could have chosen anything by which to define *Channukah*. After all, there is an entire miracle that took place! Why choose to define it by the fact that we do not deliver eulogies or fast? What can we learn from these two details?

Our rabbis state elsewhere in the *gemara* (*Avoda Zara* 8a) that the story of *Channukah* began way back in the early days after creation. When *Adam*, the first man, experienced the world's first winter, he noticed that the days were getting increasingly shorter. He thought the world was ending as a result of his sin, and so for eight days he stood, fasting and praying. With the arrival of the winter solstice, he saw that the days were beginning to lengthen once more, and that the world was not actually ending. Upon realizing this, he celebrated for the next eight days. The next year, he made both sets of these days (before and after the solstice) a celebration. Then the *gemara* adds, almost parenthetically, that he established these two holidays *le-shem shamayim*.

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How do *Adam's* holidays relate to *Channukah*? The main idea of *Adam's* holiday is that the world gets increasingly dark, and then there is an increase in light and an eight-day celebration to mark it. Remind you of anything? *Channukah* is at the darkest time of the year. We increase the light by one candle each night, and we celebrate for eight days.

We celebrate *Channukah* for eight days because, when we found the one small jug of pure oil after regaining control over the *Beis Hamikdash*, it was only enough to burn for one day – there would be no more light in the *Beis Hamikdash* after it was used. It would be a dark and cold place, and we would be enveloped by that darkness. But then came the miracle, in which the oil lasted for eight days, its light shining in the face of darkness. At the same time of year in which *Adam* saw the increase in light, we celebrate the increased light in the *Beis Hamikdash* by lighting a *menorah* in our own homes, increasing the light there as well – day after day, for eight days. Just as *Adam* was able to see *Hashem's* light at this time in the year, so, too, we are able to see it.

Now we understand one reason for the lighting, but why do not we fast or eulogize? When *Adam* thought the shortening days foretold the destruction of the world, he began to fast and said, "Woe unto me..." , preemptively eulogizing himself and the entire world. A terrible fear took hold of him. This must be what G-d meant. The world is dying... the Giver of All Life is leaving. What does a world look like when its Creator leaves? The days grow colder and darker, the energy is bleeding out of this once vibrant world. Green leaves are turning brown; they're rotting and dying on the earth. Trees that were once lush are now bones. The sun that provided the world with light, warmth, and energy seems to be slipping away, day by day. Convinced that G-d was leaving him and the world, *Adam* was in despair. Then, after eight days of this, something incredible happened: The sun shone just a little bit longer than it had the day before! This seemingly small change shook *Adam* out of his terrible despondency. He realized that G-d had not abandoned him, that He had never left *Adam* or the world at all. It was just the way of the world, a cycle in nature. It was going to be alright.

This realization was reason for tremendous celebration, not only that year, but every subsequent year as well. Furthermore, not only would he celebrate the increasing light, but he would add a second holiday to celebrate the increasing darkness. Why? Because it had taught him an important lesson: G-d was with him in the darkness as much as He was with him in the light. G-d does not abandon His world.

This idea holds true today as well. Even in the darkest times, when we do not have open miracles and when we do not see the light clearly, we must remember that *Hashem* is always with us. As we leave the light of *Channukah*, we must remember that even when the darkness seems to be increasing, or returning, *Hashem* is always right here with us.

"As we leave the light of Channukah, we must remember that even when the darkness seems to be increasing, or returning, Hashem is always right here with us. "
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~Touro Torah~

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