

פרשת בחוקתי

Parshas Bechukosai

The True Value of a Soul

דַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם אִישׁ כִּי יִקְלָא גִדֵּר בְּעֵרְכָהּ נִפְשֹׁת לְה': (ויקרא כז, ב)

Speak to the children of Israel and say to them: When a man expresses a vow, [pledging the] value of lives to the Lord. (Leviticus 27: 2)

I – A B'dieved Donation

This week, we read about a very unique type of gift a person can give to the Beis Hamikdash.ⁱ Normally, one can donate an object or its fair market value to Hekdesh.ⁱⁱ For example, you could give your car to the beis Hamikdash, or – if you really like it – you could give it's market value instead. This was seen as a way to dedicate something to G-d if you couldn't physically hand it over to the priests. Thus, a person could dedicate themselves or a loved one by pledging their market value – how much they could be sold for – to the Temple. This was actually a common in both the pagan and Jewish worlds at the time.

In Judaism, however, there was a second method of donating known as *arachin*. It's a specialized term for which there is no adequate English translation. When a person takes a vow to give their “*erech*” (loosely meaning “worth”) to the Beis Hamikdash, the Torah provides a table of fixed values based on gender and age brackets. You could have two people with very different market values giving the same amount for *arachin*.

The reason for this difference appears to lie in the nature of what you're actually evaluating. By a traditional donation, the person is giving the value of one's body. Each physical body is unique with different strengths, talents etc. And all of those features can be evaluated by people. Therefore, the value of each body is different. By *arachin*, however, the Torah says you are giving the value of one's **soul**. A soul is something too intimate and spiritual for a human being, even one's self, to accurately evaluate; only Hashem is capable of appreciating the true, unique worth of every single soul. Because of our mortal limitations, the Torah was forced to provide a standard, generic set of values based on broad demographic factors.ⁱⁱⁱ

But why bother?

Why create a type of gift that is fundamentally flawed? Why couldn't the Torah just say that because we're human and limited, we can't give the value of our souls? Just give the value of our bodies! Why settle for an imperfect metric based on numbers and chromosomes that ostensibly

glosses over the uniqueness of each precious Jewish *neshama*? It must be that on some fundamental level there is some truth to that standardization and uniformity. But what could that possibly be?

II – The Torah as a Memorial

This past Sunday, my family's shul Beth Abraham celebrated a *Hachnasas Sefer Torah* to mark the first *yartzeit* of Donny Morris who grew up davening in the *kehillah* and died in the Meron tragedy last Lag BaOmer. It was a very emotional experience for the shul, but one particular moment stuck out for me. We were marching the Torah through the streets and leading it to the shul. Donny's grandfather was standing beneath a chuppah made of *talleisim* and clutched the new Torah tightly to his chest. It was a medium sized Torah and covered in a blue *mantel* with Donny's name embroidered for everyone to see.

And then it happened.

As is tradition, members of the shul ran ahead to the sanctuary and carried out all of the other Sifrei Torah to join the celebration and welcome, as it were, the newest member of their family to their home. As the pack of Torahs embraced the Donny's, I noticed how all of the other Sifrei Torah also had mantels with the names of loved ones lovingly stitched on. Each of those Torahs was a memorial to a *neshama*, and they were all welcoming Donny's.

I am 100% certain that every one of the people memorialized by those Torahs led a unique life, both physically and spiritually. They all had different families, different challenges, and different accomplishments. And yet despite those vast differences, they were all immortalized with the same Torah. Sure, the parchments were different sizes and the handles were inlaid with different materials, but those were just part of the Torah's physical shell. Beneath every *mantel*, each with their different names, the text of the Torah – it's soul – was identical.

Such a phenomenon is not relegated to memorials. Jewish burial is also uniform across the socioeconomic and spiritual spectrums. Rich or poor, righteous or wicked, every Jew is buried in the same shrouds with the same rites and ceremonies. When the focus shifts from the body to the soul, uniformity emerges; both physical and spiritual differences recede into the background.

III – Uniform Soul

The same can be said about a Jewish *neshama*. It is true that we are all unique, and not only physically. We each have a special spiritual mission on this world for which we were imbued with a personalized toolkit of talents and interests. For some it's Torah. For others it's davening. For another it's chess. The way we each serve Hashem is personal and incapable of being replicated by anyone else throughout the world's existence. No one else could do for our family, community, and nation what we can. That's why Hashem sent us down into the time and place that He did.

And yet the mitzvah of *arachin* teaches us that all of those unique talents and accomplishments, even the most lofty and spiritual ones, are merely a *levush* (garment). They're externalities. Laudatory, important ones no doubt, but external accoutrements all the same – just like a *mantel* for a Sefer Torah.

The essence of a Jewish soul, it's true worth, lies in its source, in its interconnectedness with Hashem and the Am Yisrael.^{iv} Every *neshama* is piece of Hashem that miraculously resides inside us.^v It animates us with life and inspires us with purpose. The same universal goal to sanctify God's name and make the world a better place. With that perspective, the nuances of personal circumstance, aptitude, and accomplishment are eclipsed by our united identity and mission; when considering our national, historic enterprise, we focus on the broadest strokes of how we and our life experience fit together into the multigeneration organism of Klal Yisrael. That's why *arachin* only takes very general factors into account, much like a *matzeiva* stone or Torah *mantel*. Not because the rest is trivial, but because it can distract the living from fully appreciating the true worth of their soul.

IV – A Response to Randomness

These last two years have not been easy ones, and the tragedy at Meron last Lag BaOmer will be indelibly etched into our memory forever. It feels like we're living through the curses of the *tochacha* we read today when Hashem decreed that He will treat us "with happenstance."^{vi} It can seem that God has turned a blind eye toward His children, stranding us in world of darkness subject to the caprice and whim of inexplicable randomness.

What is our response? What are our first steps back to a life and world in which Hashem assures us in this week's Parsha that He will never truly forget us and will ultimately bring us home to His loving embrace?^{vii}

The answer is *arachin*. Focusing on the details – even the spiritual ones - of ourselves and even our community and generation in a vacuum can potentially obfuscate the *Yad Hashem* (Hand of G-d). The true worth and essence of our souls and those of our loved ones can only be fully appreciated when we consider the big picture and mission of Jewish history. When we see our souls as part of something bigger, an eternal, national chain stretching back to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov continuing to the days of Moshiach, then Hashem's Presence begins to emerge. Patterns of *hashgacha* (divine providence) take shape, and while we can't achieve total comprehension of certain events, we can cultivate a modicum of faith that Hashem is always beside us.

The Gemara explains that we are supposed to read the *Tochacha* before Shavuot to symbolize that the curses contained therein should cease from impacting the world.^{viii} As we prepare both physically and spiritually for Shavuot, a holiday with almost no unique features, it's important to for each of us to stop and take a few minutes to think about how we can gain a deeper appreciation for the true worth of our souls. Maybe it's strengthening our connection to those

who came before us. Maybe it's enriching our relationships with those around us – our present and future of our nation – with whom we share so much in common deep down. Or maybe we could try to catch a glimpse of Hashem's hand in history to learn how to better spot it in our own unique, detail-filled life.

Whatever we choose, may we merit to receive the Torah with the health and happiness mentioned in the brachos at the beginning of this week's parsha, and may we merit to appreciate the true value of each and every Jewish neshama as we dedicate ours to Hashem and His children.

ⁱ Leviticus 27:1-8

ⁱⁱ For example, see Leviticus 27:9-13

ⁱⁱⁱ Alshich Leviticus 27

^{iv} Tanya 1:32

^v Ibid 1:2; See also Tur OC 6

^{vi} Leviticus 26:24

^{vii} Megillah 31b