



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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Reincarnation

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Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
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Mishpatim

Reincarnation

Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook, when he was 20 years old and today this website is used by a half-billion people. He's worth billions of dollars, and they've already made a movie about him that was a very popular hit. And he's still relatively very young.

Now, a lot of people feel demoralized when they hear about Mr. Zuckerberg. They don't understand how this happened. They believe that they are smarter and more suitable for such success. They believe that they have greater life experience. They went to the best business schools, and they consider themselves successful individuals. And here comes along a 20-year-old lad and trumps them all! What happened here? How could such a thing happen? Something isn't right with the universe. These sorts of things are not supposed to happen.

Similarly, there's another movement in today's day and age that is causing a lot of people to feel demoralized. This is the movement of people being drawn to Judaism and to coming back to their spiritual roots.

In many Orthodox Jewish communities, it often happens that a Jew who discovered Judaism as an adult will suddenly join the community, and he comes to the synagogue—and we see how this Jew has a greater love for G-d than the standard religious Jew!

So the regulars look at this person, and they see an individual who has all the luxuries of life—but gives them all up so as to observe the Shabbos, to eat kosher. And not only that, but he does it all with pleasure—he doesn't feel that he's sacrificing anything. On the contrary—he's happy that he merited to do it.

Now, there are many devout religious Jews, who when they see such wonderful Jews and the movement they comprise, they wonder. Here, they themselves were born to devout parents, and their grandfather was a rabbi, and they've spent their entire lives from birth onward in Torah circles. They keep every minor custom strictly—but they still don't have that level of love & excitement for G-d like those who return to Judaism of their own accord.

Yes, they keep the mitzvos with great care, but to say that they're in the clouds each morning when they put on tefilin is a bit of an exaggeration. And they don't understand how it's possible that a person with no religious background, who lived for decades without Torah and mitzvos, suddenly shows a love of G-d and a spiritual awakening on a regular day that far exceeds that which we would normally experience at Neilah, the last and holiest prayer of Yom Kippur.

Now, there are questions in Judaism where the only place you can find answers for them is in the Kabbalah.

Everyone's heard of the Zohar, the foundational book of Kabbalah that's written as a commentary on the Torah. And on the Torah portion of Mishpatim, our Parshah, the Zohar begins its commentary with the following words: "Rabbi Shimon opened and said: 'V'aileh hamishpatim'... eelain s'durin d'gilgula." These are the orders of the Circuit. (We'll get to what that means shortly.)

And Rabbi Shimon adds: "Chavraya eedan, hachah l'gal'a, kama razin t'mirin d'gilgula." Sure sounds mystical, doesn't it? It means, "There's a sale at Wal-Mart." I'm just kidding. It means, "Friends, it's time to reveal several hidden secrets of the Circuit."

But what exactly is the Gilgul, the Circuit?

Judaism believes that when a person dies, his or her soul ascends to heaven, where it stands on trial in the Heavenly Court—where it might discover that it didn't complete its mission in this world. It still has some business that it didn't complete.

For example, a person who borrowed money from his friend and didn't manage to pay him back before he died—he may now wish to pay back his friend, but there's only one problem: he's in Heaven now, and souls have no business with money. And so to correct this problem, he is given another chance to come back down to this physical universe and correct what he wasn't able to do the previous time. This is actually G-d's Kindness to the souls so that it has yet another opportunity to complete what it missed in its previous lifetime.

In short, in other words, the Circuit means reincarnation. It means that you can come back, but only as a different person, born as a baby (obviously) into a new life and new chance. And that's why such a soul is called a Gilgul, a Circuit—because it completes a full circuit from Earth to Heaven and then back to Earth again.

The Talmud (Tractate Avodah Zarah 17a) tells us about Rabbi Elazar Ben Durdaya, who sinned with as many women as he could. Once, the Talmud tells us, while he was with a particular woman, she said to him that "Elazar Ben Durdaya is not accepted in repentance"—meaning that he has no hope, that his repentance will not be accepted.

So for whatever reason, it was these specific words of hers that entered his heart and didn't give him any rest. He tried to come up with excuses. He tried to blame the entire world for his behavior. But ultimately, he came to the conclusion that "the matter rests but upon me."

And the Talmud tells us: "He placed his head between his knees and wept with such sobs that his soul left his body." And then, "A Heavenly Voice came forth and declared, 'Rabbi Elazar Ben Durdaya is invited to life in the World to Come.' " This means that he had made it into Heaven.

The Talmud continues and tells us about Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the compiler of the Mishnah. "Rabbi Yehudah wept and said, 'Some acquire their world over many years, and some acquire their world in one hour.' And Rabbi Yehudah also said, 'Not only are those who repent accepted, but they are called "Rabbi" too.' "

What Rabbi Yehudah was saying is this: Ordinary people work their entire lives to earn the World to Come: "Some acquire their World over many years"—and then this individual came along and upstaged all of them and merited the World to come "in one hour"! And not only that, but they now call him "Rabbi" too! Here, people work for years upon years to become rabbis—they need to pass tests, study, and so on. And this man gets into the World to Come in just one hour—and as a rabbi too!? What's happening here?

Along comes the Arizal, Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, one of the fathers of Kabbalah, and explains what was hiding behind the story of Rabbi Elazar Ben Durdaya.

Several hundred years before him, there lived in Jerusalem Yochanan the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest. He was from the Chashmonai clan. According to some opinions, he was actually the father of Matisyahu, the first leader of the Maccabi rebellion. Other opinions say he was a grandson of Matisyahu.

In any case, he was connected to the Maccabis and the Chanukah miracle, and he served as the Kohein Gadol in the Beis Hamikdash, the Holy Temple, for 80 years.

Now it's known that for a Kohein Gadol to enter and exit the Kodesh HaKodashim, the Holy of Holies, every Yom Kippur, he must be a tzadik gamur, a completely holy man, "because if he even had one undesirable thought [while inside the Holy of Holies], he would not remain among the living after the Yom Kippur service."

But Yochanan Kohein Gadol served as the High Priest for 80 years—indicating that we have here a holy man. Furthermore, it says in the Talmud Yerushalmi that once while performing the service inside the Kodesh HaKodashim one Yom Kippur, he was divinely informed that at that moment, his sons had won an important battle—indicating that he also had prophecy or Ruach HaKodesh, the "Divine Spirit".

And yet, the Talmud (Tractate Brachos 29a) says about him that "in the end, he became a Tzeduki"—at the end of his life, he distanced himself from the Sanhedrin, most of whom were Torah-true Perushim, and he joined the Tzeduki sect.

Now, the Tzedukim were a cult that had spun away from Judaism. They rejected the fundamental belief in the eventual Tchiyas HaMaysim, the Revival of the Dead, as well as the belief in life after death and Heaven, etc. Unfortunately, they were a large and powerful movement in the days of the Second Temple.

So when Yochanan Kohein Gadol passed away and arrived at the Heavenly Court, there waited for him a reward for all that he had accomplished on earth over 80 years—for all the good deeds that he had done here in this world. But alas, he could not enjoy it—he didn't have the key with which to get into Heaven.

Since at the end of his life he had denied the World to Come, it became impossible to enjoy something that he hadn't believed in while he had been alive.

By way of parable, the United States is responsible for all her citizens even when they are in foreign countries, and the United States will do everything it can to save them. However, the American citizen who repudiates his citizenship, who tears up his passport and declares out loud for one and all to hear that he doesn't want to be an American citizen—I don't think that the government is responsible for such a person.

And so the soul of Yochanan Kohein Gadol needed to come back down to this world—and Rabbi Elazar Ben Durdaya was his Gilgul. Even though he had not been involved with Torah and mitzvos during his life, still, since he repented before he died, and openly admitted the concept of life after death, he got the key through which he could enter the World to Come which had been waiting for him since his previous life.

What we learn from this story is that when we see a young man succeeding in business in a way that really sparks our amazement; it's very possible that behind his success are not the brains of a 20-year-old lad but the subconscious lifetime experience of many years from the previous incarnation.

And this may be an explanation of the wonderful phenomenon we're witnessing in our generation—of thousands of Jews growing up without any formal religious Jewish background suddenly discovering their Judaism as adults, and living it with such energy that even big and important rabbis are put to shame.

It's possible that this great love of G-d that they have, this burning desire for mitzvos, flows from their previous Gilgul. And therefore, we should be happy that we live in a generation in which many, many Jews are being aroused to serve G-d out of love. And their passion is contagious, too—and it inspires us to serve G-d out of love.

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