



WHEN SUCCESS BREEDS HUMILITY

What causes people to be magnanimous? What's the right way to handle success?

When the first Chabad Rebbe bested his opponents and achieved legitimacy for the new Chassidic movement, he wrote a letter to his followers which set their priorities straight.

TEACHER'S MANUAL



JEWISH INSIGHTS

A TASTE OF THE REBBE'S TEACHINGS



PARSHAT VAYISHLACH

Parshat Vayishlach

Dedicated in honor of the Bar Mitzvah of
Gavriel Noach Druk
by his parents
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When the Alter Rebbe left prison, he wrote a letter titled “*Katonti*,” in which he encouraged the Chassidim not to seek revenge. It was based on this week’s Torah portion; when Jacob asks G-d to deliver him from Esau’s hand, he says, “*Katonti*—I am unworthy.” Rashi explains the literal meaning – that he though the ‘used up’ all his merits (Source 2). But the Alter Rebbe illuminated it with a deeper explanation.

C. The Closeness Effect.....12

As the Rebbe explains, the Alter Rebbe says that when a person experiences a closeness with G-d, he becomes elevated to a higher plane and gains a new appreciation for G-dliness. In that state, he sees things differently; now that he sees the “broader picture,” he feels small and unworthy. That was the real story with Jacob.

The same explanation is brought for the blessing regarding forgiveness in the Amidah. If we already reached the Amidah, shouldn’t we have already achieved forgiveness? Rather, as we elevate ourselves, we discover new deficiencies.

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This resolves our initial question: It is specifically when we experience significant miracles that we become more aware of G-d and therefore more aware of our own deficiencies.

Introduction

Occasionally, we experience moments of success. Business goes well, goals are fulfilled, and we feel good about ourselves. We feel smug. Why not? Life is good, and we are winning.

In this class, we will read about Jacob's prayer to G-d upon approaching Esau, alongside its explanation taught by the Alter Rebbe during his moment of success – after emerging victorious from an ugly attempt by his opponents to have him arrested and outlawed.

This prayer teaches us how to approach success.

Teacher's note:

Click here to listen to the original Sicha:

<https://ashreinu.app/player?parentEvent=665&event=8053>

A. Goodness for the Guilty

Source 1 Abridged Shulchan Aruch 61:1

There is a special blessing occasionally recited at the Torah reading called “Hagomel.” What is this blessing made for?

On four occasions a person must thank G-d for His goodness;

1) after crossing the ocean and reaching his destination;

2) after crossing the desert or any other dangerous road and reaching his destination; included in this rule is also one who was saved from any other peril, such as when a wall caved in on him, or an ox lunged at him ready to gore him, or robbers attacked him on the road, or thieves attacked him at night, and he was saved from them;

3) one who suffered from serious illness or injury, or he was confined to bed for at least three days due to an illness and his health was restored;

4) one who was in prison, even if it was only because of money matters and he was released.

A sign: “And all the living shall thank you.” Chaim—Life is an acronym for [the Hebrew terms for] illness, suffering, sea and desert.

What blessing is recited? Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, King of the Universe, Who bestows goodness upon the guilty, for He has bestowed goodness upon me.

אַרְבַּעַ צְרִיכִים לְהוֹדוֹת:

א. יוֹרְדֵי הַיָּם כְּשֵׁיִגִיעוּ לְמַחוֹז חֲפָצָם,

ב. וְכֵן הוֹלְכֵי מִדְּבָרִיּוֹת אוֹ בְּשָׂאֵר דְּרָךְ שְׂמַחֲזֵק שְׂיֵשׁ בוֹ סִכָּנָה, כְּשֵׁיִגִיעוּ לְמַחוֹז חֲפָצָם, וּבְכֻלָּל זֶה גַם מִי שֶׁהָיָה בְּסִכָּנָה אַחֲרֵת וְנִצַּל הֵימָנָה, כְּגוֹן שֶׁנִּפְלַע עָלָיו כְּתֵל אוֹ נִגְחוּ שׁוֹר אוֹ שָׂבָאוּ עָלָיו לְסִטִּים בְּדֶרֶךְ וְשׁוֹדְדֵי לַיְלָה וְנִצַּל מֵהֶם וְכַדוּמָה,

ג. וּמִי שֶׁהָיָה חוֹלֵה שְׂיֵשׁ בוֹ סִכָּנָה, כְּגוֹן מִכָּה שֶׁל חֶלֶל, אוֹ שֶׁהָיָה מוּטָל בַּמָּטָה שְׁלֵשָׁה יָמִים מִחַמַּת הַחֲלִי וְנִתְרַפָּא וְהוֹלֵךְ עַל בְּרִיּוֹ.

ד. וּמִי שֶׁהָיָה חָבוּשׁ בְּבֵית הָאֲסוּרִים, אֲפֵלוּ רַק עַל עֶסְקֵי מְמוֹן וְיָצָא.

וְסִימָנָךְ וְכֹל הַחַיִּים יוֹדוּךָ סֵלָה, חוֹלָה, יְסוּרִים, יָם, מְדָבָר.

מֵה מְבָרַךְ: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַגּוֹמֵל לְחַיִּים טוֹבוֹת שְׂגֻמָּלָנִי כָּל טוֹב. וְהַשׁוֹמְעִים אוֹמְרִים, מִי שְׂגֻמְלָךְ טוֹב הוּא יִגְמְלֶךְ כָּל טוֹב סֵלָה.

The foundation for this blessing comes from Psalm 107 which details these four dangerous situations, and the rescue G-d performs for a Jew when he cries out for salvation. The chapter adds that the people experiencing these salvations will thank G-d publicly: "And they shall exalt Him in an assembly of people, and in a sitting of elders, praise Him." This is the source for our custom.

>> The Rebbe

Why Be Negative?

The text of the "Hagomel" blessing has a surprising feature that isn't found in any other blessing: "Blessed are You . . . Who bestows goodness upon the guilty, for He has bestowed goodness upon me." It seems reasonable that the only focus of the blessing should be the specific kindness we received from G-d. If so, the text of the blessing should read, "Blessed are You ... Who bestowed goodness upon me." Why must we mention our own deficiencies and say that G-d "bestows goodness upon the guilty"?

בנוסח ברכת הגומל מצינו דבר פלא
שלא מצינו בנוסח שאר הברכות,
ברכות הניה וברכות הודאה -
"ברוך .. הגומל לחייבים טובות
שגמלני טוב", דלכאורה, כאשר
מברכים ומודים להקב"ה צריך
לומר רק על מה היא ההודאה, ואם
כן, ה' צריך להיות נוסח הברכה:
"ברוך .. שגמלני טוב", ולמה צריך
להזכיר חובה לעצמו ולומר "הגומל
לחייבים טובות"?

This blessing has a very bizarre element. Someone comes up to the Torah to thank G-d for rescuing him from a life-threatening danger, and yet the first thing he says is "(Who bestows goodness) upon the guilty," declaring himself unworthy of the miracle. Why now? Is now the time to tell G-d that we sinned? When we eat bread and bless G-d for "bringing forth bread from the ground," do we say "Who brings forth bread for the guilty from the ground"? When we make a Shehecheyanu on a holiday or happy occasion, do we say, "Who has given us, the guilty ones, life, sustained us and brought us to this time"?

Yet, with the blessing of Hagomel, when one goes through a dangerous experience at sea/road/sickness/incarceration and thanks G-d from the depth of his heart for being saved from calamity, we decide it's time to remind G-d that we are guilty. Why now?

B. Jacob's Humble Prayer

This question is addressed by the first Chabad Rebbe in a special letter which begins with the word “Katonti—I am unworthy” (lit. I feel small). But before we read the letter, let us first address the context in which the letter was written, which is connected to the 19th day of the month of Kislev – which we will mark next week.

The letter of the First Chabad Rebbe

The 19th of Kislev is marked as the “New Years for Chassidism.” On this day in 1798, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1812), the founder of the Chabad movement, was released from a Czarist prison. The joy of his release wasn't just his own; this day opened a new chapter in the history of the Chassidic movement and marked a new era in the dissemination of the Torah's inner dimension.

Chassidism already took root two generations prior. The founder of the Chassidic movement, Rabbi Yisroel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), revealed mystical ideas of Chassidism which were, until then, only accessible to a select few. After his passing, the movement continued to gain momentum under his successor, Rabbi Dovber “the Maggid of Mezritch.” He too, had a special connection with the 19th of Kislev: It was the day he left this world, 26 years before Rabbi Schneur Zalman was released from prison. Shortly before his passing, the Maggid even told Rabbi Schneur Zalman, “this day is our holiday.”

Rabbi Schneur Zalman took it a step further by founding Chassidus Chabad – Chassidism which can be brought down in philosophy, in a set form of learning, contemplation, and self-evaluation, which transformed abstract mystical parts of Kabbalah to be understood and applicable to one's everyday life.

During its pioneering years, the Chassidus movement faced great opposition – at times very intense – from the established Rabbinate and Jewish establishment. Even in the Chassidic movement itself, some of Rabbi Schneur Zalman's associates were worried that he crossed the line in his efforts to make Chassidism popular, taking mystical ideas meant only for the intellectual and holy and making them available for the masses.

In the fall of 1798, several Jews in the opposition went to the government and falsely accused Rabbi Schneur Zalman of fomenting a rebellion against the czar. Rabbi Schneur Zalman was arrested on charges of treason and sent to the Petropavalsky prison in St. Petersburg. Fifty-three days later, he was miraculously released and acquitted from all charges.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman saw the imprisonment as a reflection of the heavenly opposition to his decision to disseminate the secrets of Torah, and therefore saw his release as a

vindication as well. Therefore, after 19 Kislev, he intensified his efforts in disseminating Chassidism and expanding his ideas.

*

His release from prison was a clear, overwhelming victory for the Chassidic movement, and brought immense relief for the general Chasidic community in Russia and beyond. After 53 days of worry for their Rebbe's fate along with concern for the future of the entire movement, justice finally prevailed. You can imagine the desire of Chassidim to walk the streets in victory, deriding the opposition for the foiling of their shameful plot.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman, however, demanded that no such thing happen. Immediately upon leaving prison, he wrote this letter, in which he explains the Jacob's statement, "I have become unworthy for all the kindnesses." In the end of the letter, he asks from Chassidim not to seek revenge on their fellow Jews, but rather to show humility and forgiveness.

In the following Sicha, the Rebbe dissects and explains the letter.

Jacob's Prayer

To understand the letter, let us first read about the events leading to Jacob's prayer from this week's Torah portion.

Source 2 Genesis 32:10-12

Jacob, who fled from Esau's wrath to Haran, got married there, built a beautiful family and accumulated great wealth. After 22 years, he decided it was time to head back home. However, spies he sends to investigate return to inform him that his brother Esau did not forget what had happened, and intended to give payback – greeting him with an army of 400 soldiers.

Jacob does all he can to prepare. He sends his brother gifts in an attempt to appease him; he prepares for war in case the gifts don't do the job; and then he presents a heartfelt prayer to G-d.

And Jacob said, "O G-d of my father Abraham and G-d of my father Isaac, the L-rd Who said to me, 'Return to your land and to your birthplace, and I will do good to you.'

"I have become unworthy from all the kindnesses and from all the truth that You have rendered Your servant, for with my staff I crossed the Jordan river, and now I have become two camps, prepared for battle.

וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב: אֱלֹהֵי
אָבִי אַבְרָהָם וְאֱלֹהֵי אָבִי
יִצְחָק, ה' הָאֵלֵּם אֵלַי
שׁוּב לְאָרְצְךָ וּלְמוֹלַדְתְּךָ
וְאִיטִיבָה עִמָּךְ.

קִטְנֹתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים
וּמִכָּל־הַאֲמָת, אֲשֶׁר
עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־עַבְדְּךָ, כִּי
בְּמִקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת־
הַיַּרְדֵּן, הִזָּה וְעַתָּה הֵייתִי
לְשְׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת.

“Now deliver me from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid of him, lest he come and strike me, my wife with children.”

הֲצִילֵנִי נָא מִיַּד אָחִי מִיַּד
עֲשׂוֹ כִּי־יִרָא אֶנְכִּי אֶתּוֹ
כִּי־יָבוֹא וְהִכָּנִי אִם־עַל־
בָּנָיִם.

Rashi

What does he mean with the words, “I have become unworthy” (lit. small)?

I have become unworthy: My merits have diminished because of the kindnesses and truth that You have done to me. Therefore, I fear lest I have become sullied with sin since the time you promised you will be good to me, and it will cause me to be delivered into Esau’s hands.

קִטְנֵתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים:
נִתְמַעְטוּ זְכוּתֵי עַל יְדֵי
הַחֲסָדִים וְהָאֱמֶת שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ
עִמִּי, לְכֹךְ אֲנִי יָרָא, שְׂמָא
מִשְׁהַבְּטָחְתָּנִי נִתְקַלְקַלְתִּי
בְּחַטָּא וַיִּגְרַם לִי לְהִמָּסֵר
בְּיַד עֲשׂוֹ (שבת ל"ב).

If G-d promised Jacob on his journey to Haran that “I am with you, and I will guard you wherever you go,” why was Jacob doubting the future? He should have believed in G-d! Why was he praying to be saved? Therefore, Jacob explains, “I have become unworthy from all the kindnesses.” In spite of G-d’s word, he still feels very small. He fears that G-d’s great kindness to him until that moment have diminished his merits, and the promise G-d gave him 22 years earlier no longer applies. Therefore, he must once again pray for G-d’s rescue.

C. The Closeness Effect

>> The Rebbe

In his letter following his release, Rabbi Schneur Zalman brings a profound explanation to Jacob's feeling of unworthiness.

The Closer, the Lesser

The deeper meaning in this passage was explained by Alter Rebbe in the letter he wrote following his release from prison (when he experienced the statement of Psalms, "He redeemed my soul in peace"), which begins with this very passage.

He explains that Jacob felt unworthy of "all the kindnesses and ... the truth" because of the "kindness and truth." He felt unworthy of salvation precisely because he had experienced so much of G-d's kindness.

The Alter Rebbe explains: Why did Jacob feel small? Because he had crossed the Jordan to Haran with only a stick in his hand, and now he was returning with two camps. G-d's extensive kindness towards him made him feel small – specifically because he felt so close to G-d.

This idea is explained at length in Chassidic discourses in which the matter is applied to our own service of G-d. In truth, it is quite simple:

ויובן מפנימיות הענין בזה - כמרומו גם באגרת הקודש, שכתבה רבינו הזקן לאחרי שיצא מבית האסורים, שאז הי' אצלו הענין ד"פדה בשלום נפשי"², ולאחרי זה שלח אגרת הקודש זו - קטונתי מכל החסדים.

ושם הוא מבאר, שזה שיעקב הרגיש את ה"קטונתי מכל החסדים ומכל האמת", מצד שהראו לו את החסדים והאמת, וזה נתן לו הרגשה של קטונתי.

וזהו ההסבר של אדמו"ר הזקן, מדוע יעקב הרגיש "קטונתי" - משום ש"במקלי עברתי את הירדן הזה, ועתה הייתי לשני מחנות", שהחסדים והאמת גרמו אצלו הרגשה של קטונות, מצד הקירוב שהיה לו מלמעלה.

וכפי שמבואר טעם הדבר במאמרים³ המבארים הענין בעבודת ה', ומובן גם בפשטות הדברים:

ואילך). וש"נ.

(2) תהלים נה, יט. וראה אג"ק שלו ח"א ע' צח ואילך (נעתק ב"היום יום" יט כסלו).

(3) ראה גם ד"ה קטונתי דליל ויום ש"פ וישב תשי"ז (ת"מ ח"ה ע' 217)

When an ordinary person, and especially an undignified person, “a most lowly human being, dirty and laying in filth” (as described in Tanya), is welcomed and shown kindness by the King of all kings, G-d Himself, in all his glory – the vastness of the disparity gives rise to an intense feeling of humility and unworthiness in the individual to whom the king has shown kindness.

כאשר ישנו “איש הדיוט ונבזה ושפל אנשים ומנוול המוטל באשפה” (כדאיתא בתניא), ובא מלך מלכי המלכים הקב”ה בכבודו ובעצמו, ומראה לו ענין של “חסדים” ו”אמת” - הנה ריחוק הערך שביניהם מעורר שפלות גדולה ביותר וביותר אצל איש ההדיוט כו' שאליו יורד המלך.

Picture this: a person finds himself in a tough situation, whether personal or economic etc. He might have lost his job or experienced a crisis in his family. Suddenly, the president of the United States himself shows up at his door and gives him a special invitation to the White House. There, the President greets him warmly and gives him a high position in the government accompanied with a hefty salary. This person will be so full of gratitude that he will be embarrassed to even look at the president in the face. The kindness he is receiving is so deep and unwarranted that it highlights the disparities between the benefactor – the president – and himself, causing him to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed in the president’s presence.

He won't start walking around with his chest pumped up, because he knows full well that he didn't earn the position at all; he knows that it was only the kindness of the president.

The Alter Rebbe explains that the same is true when a Jew receives kindness from G-d: The closeness should naturally cause a very intense feeling of humility and respect.

Forgiveness in the Amidah

This also explains the passage we recite in the Amidah, “Forgive us...for we have sinned, pardon us...for we have transgressed”:

A famous question is asked: Why isn't the prayer for forgiveness situated at the beginning of the service? It would seem appropriate to request forgiveness before approaching the king, and to only

ועל פי זה מבואר גם הטעם לאמירת “סלח לנו .. כי חטאנו מחל לנו .. כי פשענו” בתפלת שמונה עשרה דוקא:

ידועה הקושיא בזה, דלכאורה, ענין הסליחה ומחילה על עוונות ופשעים, הי' צריך להיות בתחילת העבודה, בתחילת התפלה, שכן, לפני שנגשים אל המלך צריכים

then “enter the King’s chamber” to present our prayers. Instead, we follow the opposite order. We first recite “*pesukei dezimra*,” the opening chapters of thanks, followed by the blessings of Shema and the Shema itself, and finally, we reach the Amidah prayer when we stand before G-d silently like servants before a master in total reverence – and then we suddenly remember that we have sins for which we need to repent and request G-d’s forgiveness?

From A Bird’s Eye View

The explanation: There are certain actions which, before standing before G-d during the Amidah, don’t seem to be sins or transgressions; “a person’s path is straight in his own eyes...” But when one enters the King’s palace and stands as a servant before his master, he suddenly realizes that those matters were an act of disrespect to G-d – being that His presence fills the entire heavens and earth. Those deeds which seem “straight” – and not illogically – suddenly seem different during those moments before the King, and he realizes that he needs to request forgiveness for those sins and transgressions.

לבקש תחילה סליחה ומחילה, ולאחרי זה יכולים להכנס להיכל המלך; ואילו הסדר הוא - שבסוף התפלה, לאחרי שכבר אמר פסוקי-דזמרה וההקדמה שלפני זה, ברכות קריאת שמע, וקריאת שמע, עד שהגיע לשמונה עשרה, שאז עומד הוא “כעבדא קמי מרי”⁵, ביטול לגמרי - אזי נזכר שישנו ענין של חטא ופשע שצריך לשוב על זה בתשובה ולבקש על זה סליחה ומחילה!?

ומבואר בזה⁶ - שיש ענינים כאלו, שקודם שעומד לפני המלך בשמונה עשרה, אינו רואה כלל שזהו ענין של חטא ופשע, שכן, “דרך איש ישר בעיניו”⁷; אבל כאשר נכנס לפלטרין של מלך, ועומד “כעבדא קמי מרי” - אזי תופס שזהו מעמד ומצב ד”מחוי במחוג קמי מלכא”, שהרי “מלא כל הארץ כבודו”⁸, “את השמים ואת הארץ אני מלא”⁹, ולכן, גם מה שהי’ “ישר בעיניו”, והי’ לזה מקום בשכל, להיותו מבחוץ - הנה בשעה שתופס שעומד לפני המלך, אזי רואה שצריך לבקש על זה “סלח לנו”, כיון שזהו ענין של “חטא”, ויתירה מזה, שזהו ענין של “פשע”, “פשעים אלו המרדים”¹⁰.

8 ישעי' 1, ג.
9 ירמ' כג, כד.
10 יזמא לו, ב, וש"נ.

5 שבת י"ד, א.
6 ראה לקר"ש שם הערה 37, וש"נ.
7 משלי כא, ב.

The general concept is that the closer you are with an esteemed individual, the more you begin to understand how much gratitude is owed to your benefactor. For example, a ten-year-old child will at times foolishly disrespect his mother. But years later, when he gets married and has children of his own, he will begin to appreciate how much love and patience his parents had for him. Remembering how he treated his mother, he will be filled with shame as well as immense gratitude.

What happened? What changed 20 years later? It's because he is now in a higher, wiser position. He has now been exposed to his mother's true level of dedication. It is specifically this exposure – becoming closer to his mother – that will cause him to be ashamed of his behavior.

The same is true in our situation: at one point, you may feel comfortable doing this or that; you will assume it's acceptable. However, as soon as you are somehow elevated to a higher plane, your understanding of life will change and you will now view that matter as unbecoming.

Here's another example: If you wear regular clothing in the street, you will feel respectable without any second thought. However, if you walk into a wedding reception, you will suddenly feel embarrassed and out of place. What happened? Have your clothing changed? The difference in attitude stems from the change in your environment; now that you are in a more refined space, your clothing seem simple and inadequate.

The same is true when a Jew begins his prayer. At first, you feel secure in your spiritual state. But after praying with meditation and contemplation and elevating yourself to a higher level of holiness, you suddenly feel like your former situation will no longer fit the bill. You therefore, at that moment, implores G-d to forgive you once again.

Jacob's Unworthiness

On the same note, the Alter Rebbe writes in his letter that the closer one feels to G-d, the more he should feel inadequate and unworthy. Therefore, Jacob felt very small in his own eyes, to the extent that he felt like a sinner.

At face value, this raises questions: If Jacob had transgressed G-d's will, he should have repented earlier, and he no doubt did so. Our forefathers are called "Chariots" to the Almighty; all their days and all their actions were done in exact accordance with G-d's will. If so, how could Jacob have been so sinful to make him deserving of succumbing to Esau's

וזהו גם מה שכתוב באגרת הקודש בענין "כל הקרוב כו" שצריך להיות "יותר שפל רוח למטה", "קטנת", שלכן הי' יעקב "קטן .. במאד מאד בעיניו", ועד ש"נדמה בעיניו שחטא":

לכאורה אינו מובן: אם הי' אצל יעקב ענין של חטא - הרי עוד לפני זה הי' צריך לשוב בתשובה, ובודאי שב בתשובה; ובכלל, הרי "האבות הן הן המרכבה"¹¹, שבכל ימיהם ובכל פעולותיהם היו במעמד ומצב של "מרכבה"¹², ואם כן, איך יתכן אצל יעקב ענין של חטא, שיכול לגרום ש"יבוא¹³ והכני"?!

(13) וישלח שם, יב.

(11) ב"ר פמ"ז, ו. פפ"ב, ו. ועוד.
(12) ראה תניא פכ"ג (כה, ב). רפ"ד. ובכ"מ.

attack?

The Alter Rebbe therefore explains that being shown so much kindness from G-d – in other words, being elevated to a higher spiritual plane, his actions which didn't seem sinful in any form beforehand suddenly seemed (from a higher vantage point) to be transgressions – with serious

implications.

With this, the Alter Rebbe explains Jacob's thoughts. It wasn't a fear that his merits were used up and he was "out of fuel," so to speak. It was much more profound than that.

Jacob experienced a tremendous amount of kindness from G-d. He got married, built a family, had many children, and amassed great wealth. He was establishing the foundation for the nation of Israel. This brought him ever closer to G-d. However, in his heightened spiritual state, what used to be considered normal and good was no longer good enough. He felt humbled. Therefore, he turned to G-d and said, "I am unworthy."

ומבאר על זה אדמו"ר הזקן, שכיון שהראו לו "כל החסדים" ו"כל האמת", היינו, שהעלו אותו לעולם עליון יותר - הנה גם הענינים שבמעמדו ומצבו הקודם לא נחשבו לחטא, נחשבים עתה (בעולם עליון יותר) לענין של חטא, ובמילא הרי זה יכול לגרום שישתלשל מזה למטה מטה כו'.

D. Resolving the Blessing

>> The Rebbe

When We Feel Guilty

The above discussion will resolve the question – why do we declare ourselves “guilty” in the blessing of thanksgiving, despite not doing so in any other blessing which is recited?

This is a blessing which we recite after G-d releases us from a bondage. In the words of the Psalm which is the source of this custom, “From their difficult straits, He gives salvation,” and therefore, we “thank G-d for His kindness ... and offer sacrifices of thanks.” This thanksgiving offering in the Temple is the equivalent of the blessing recited today.

When this takes place – and we witness G-d’s “kindness and truth,” we begin to feel unworthy. A person will begin to contemplate his condition; elements of his life which seemed satisfactory at a previous time will no longer seem so. Despite the fact that the person remains in the physical reality, the experience of witnessing G-d’s kindness elevates him to a higher spiritual plane; G-d’s presence is more perceivable, and, from that perspective, those elements of his life now seem like sins. He now feels that he is unworthy and “culpable.”

ויש לומר בדרך אפשר, שזהו הטעם שדוקא ב"ברכת הגומל" מצינו הענין ד"חייבים", אף שלא מצינו זאת בכל שאר הברכות, ברכות הני' וברכות הודאה:

ברכת הגומל היא הודאה להקב"ה על היציאה מן המיצר אל המרחב, ובלשון הכתוב במזמור תהלים הנ"ל שבו נזכרו אלו שחייבים להודות: "ממצוקותיהם יושיעם"¹⁴, ולכן, "יודו לה' חסדו"¹⁵, "ויזבחו זבחי תודה"¹⁶ - שזהו גם ענין ברכת הגומל, שהיא על דרך קרבן תודה בזמן שבית המקדש היה קיים¹⁷.

ולכן, כאשר יהודי רואה "חסדים" ו"אמת", אזי נעשה אצלו הענין ד"קטנתי", שמעורר אצלו התבוננות במעמדו ומצבו, ובא לידי הכרה, שגם הענינים שהיו עד עתה כדבעי, "ישר בעיניו", וגם לאמיתתו של דבר, להיותו בעולם שלמטה מהעולם שממנו נמשכו ה"חסדים" וה"אמת" - הרי כיון שהעלו אותו למעמד ומצב נעלה יותר בגילוי אלקות, "קמי מלכא", הקב"ה התגלה בפניו בגילוי חדש, אזי נחשבים גם ענינים אלו לחטא, ולכן נרגש אצלו שהוא במעמד ומצב ד"חייבים".

משיחת י"ב תמוז, ה'תשכ"א. רשימת השומעים בלתי מוגה

תורת מנחם כרך לא, עמוד 401

(17) ראה רא"ש ברכות פ"ט ס"ג. פרש"י צו ז, יב. זבחים ז, א (ד"ה לא דידי').

(14) קז, יג-יט.
(15) שם, ח-טו-כא-לא.
(16) שם, כב.

Now, we can begin to understand why the Hagomel blessing is the time to say that we are guilty: The Hagomel blessing is not similar to other blessings, which are recited on normal occasions, like when eating bread etc. Rather, it's about a salvation from a dangerous sickness or a long journey in the desert – a great display of kindness from G-d. When someone survives such a danger healthy and unscathed together with his family, he begins to feel G-d's presence. Naturally, he feels humbled and guilty. From his new perspective, life takes on new meaning and his old spiritual state will no longer suffice.

The following story illustrates this idea; for Rabbi Saadiah Gaon, a meditation before bed would bring him to view ordinary behavior as very lacking.

A Story - A Tzaddik's Repentance Chabad.org/45302

More than 1000 years ago, there lived a great and holy leader and teacher called Rabbi Saadiah Gaon (882–942). The Gaon (as the leading sages of Babylonian Jewry were titled at the time) had many hundreds of pupils, and all of them had a great thirst to learn. Even a casual movement or word from their revered teacher provided them a lesson for life.

One winter morning, two of his pupils happened to be walking in the mountains when they heard a strange sound on the other side of a hill. When they approached the summit they saw, to their great surprise, their master sitting on the snow-covered ground, weeping, praying and engaging in other acts of penitence. What could a tzaddik (perfectly righteous person) such as their teacher possibly need to repent for? Could he have committed some sin, G-d forbid? They hurriedly departed from that place. But later that day, they could no longer restrain themselves and asked their teacher what the scene they had witnessed had been about.

“I do that every day,” he said to them. “Every day I repent and plead with G-d to forgive my shortcomings and failings in my service of Him.”

“Your failings?” they asked. “Of what failings does the Rabbi speak of?”

“Let me tell you a story,” said Rabbi Saadiah. “Something that happened to me a while ago.”

“At one point in my life, I decided that all the honor and attention I was receiving from everyone around me was interfering with my service of the Creator. G-d must be served with joy, and without complete humility, joy is impossible. So I decided that I would spend several months in a place where no one recognized me.

“I dressed in simple garments and began my self-imposed exile, wandering from town to town. One night I was in a small inn run by an old Jew. He was a very kind and simple man, and we spoke for a while before I went to sleep. Early the next morning, after I had prayed shacharit (the morning prayer), I bade him farewell and was again on my way.

“What I didn’t know was that several of my pupils had been searching for me, and several hours after I left the inn they appeared, hot on my trail. ‘Did you see Rabbi Saadiah Gaon?’ they asked him. ‘We have reason to believe that he was here.’

“‘Saadiah Gaon?’ replied the bewildered old Jew. ‘What would the great Rav Saadiah be doing in a place like mine? Rav Saadiah Gaon in my inn? No . . . I’m sure that you are very mistaken! There was no Rav Saadiah Gaon here!’

“But when the young men described me to him and explained about my exile and ‘disguise,’ the old Jew grabbed his head and cried: ‘Oy! Rav Saadiah! Rav Saadiah was here! You are right! Oy, Oy!’ and he ran outside, jumped into his wagon and began urging his horse to go as fast as possible in the direction I had taken.

“After a short time he caught up to me, jumped from his carriage and fell at my feet, weeping: ‘Please forgive me, Rav Saadiah. Please forgive me. I didn’t know that it was you!’

“I made him stand up and brush himself off, and then said to him: ‘But my dear friend, you treated me very well, you were very kind and hospitable. Why are you so sorry? You have nothing to apologize for.’

“‘No, no, Rabbi,’ he replied. ‘If I would have known who you are, I would have served you completely differently!’

“Suddenly I realized that this man was teaching me a very important lesson in the service of G-d, and that the purpose of my exile had been fulfilled. I thanked and blessed him, and returned home.

“Since then, every evening when I say the prayer before sleeping, I go over in my mind how I served G-d that day. Then I think of that old innkeeper, and say to myself: ‘Oy! If I had known about G-d in the beginning of the day what I know now, I would have served Him completely differently!’

“And that is what I was repenting for this morning.”

This is the message the Alter Rebbe wanted to impart to his followers after the great victory when he was released from prison. The kindness G-d had shown to the Rebbe and the Chassidim, he explained, demanded that they be elevated to higher level of being. Instead of walking around and saying “aha” to their oppressors, it was a time to feel gratitude and humility; it was a time to forgive.

This is also a lesson for us. At times, we find ourselves in a successful position, be it financially, in our family, or in our spiritual development. We must always remember that success comes from heaven, and success is a gesture of closeness from G-d – and when we become close to him, we should develop a sense of humility; we should be more modest, specifically because we are closer to G-d.