



נחזיר את עצמנו...

In Advance of the Day of Judgement

Rabbi Chaim Vital writes (*Shaar HaKavanot: Drushei Rosh Hashana*) “My teacher Za”l (The Ari Za”l) was wont to weep during the prayer service on Rosh Hashana even though it is a festival day [during which public expression of mourning is prohibited], and all the more so did he shed tears on Yom Kippur. My teacher Za”l said that if one is not overcome with weeping on these days it means that his soul is defective and imperfect.

Sefer Yechaveh Daas (Chelek 2 Siman 69) points out that Rabbeinu the Ari Za”l wept spontaneously and without effort on Rosh Hashana, as implied by his student’s description of him being “overcome with weeping.”

How should a person raise himself to the level where he will be overcome by tears on Rosh Hashana?

The Gemara (Berachos 28b) points the way to an answer. The Gemara relates: *The students of Rebbe Yochanan Ben Zakkai came to visit him during his final illness. He saw them and burst into tears. The students said to him, “The lamp of Israel, the right-side pillar, the solid mallet – why are you crying?” He said to them, “Were they taking me to stand before a king of flesh and blood, who is here today and in the grave tomorrow, whose anger would not be forever, whose imprisonment of me would not last forever, who should he execute me my death would not last forever, and*



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whom I could assuage with words or bribe with money – despite all this I would be in tears. They are taking me now to stand before the King of kings, HaKadosh Baruch Hu, who lives and endures for eternity, whose anger would be forever, whose imprisonment of me would last forever, who should he execute me my death would be final, and whom I am unable to placate with words or bribe with money. Over and above all this, there are two paths before me, one leads to Gan Eden and the other, to Gehinom, and I do not know on which path they will take me. Should I not weep?”

They said to him, “Our Rabbi – bless us.” He said to them, “May it be His will that your fear of Heaven equal your fear of those of flesh and blood.” They said to him, “Should it only be as great and not more?” He said to them, “Would that it be [equal]! The proof: people commit their transgressions in private, fearful of being seen by others, but heedless of G-d who sees all.” Before he died, he said to them, “Remove the utensils [from the house] so they will not become impure [when I die], and set out a chair for Chezkia King of Yehuda who has arrived [to escort me.]”

The list of Rebbe Yochanan Ben Zakkai’s accomplishments in Torah study is awesome. It is told of him that birds that passed overhead while he was studying Torah would be burnt to a crisp by the flames of the angels who congregated in his presence to hear the words issuing from his lips! The Gemara affirms that he earned the eternal reward promised to those who love the Torah unconditionally. (See Succa 28a).



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The matter is puzzling: how is it possible that a spiritual giant such as Rebbe Yochanan Ben Zakkai should imagine that he was destined for Gehinom? Moreover, if someone on that level is unworthy of Gan Eden, what hope is there for the rest of us? Chid"ra (Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai) explained that even though Rebbe Yochanan Ben Zakkai knew his own stature and worth, he used his own example to prompt his students to reach greater heights of spiritual perfection. The moral on the Chida's account is uplifting, but Rebbe Yochanan Ben Zakkai's logic still stands in need of explanation.

The next link in our chain of explanation is the Gemara (Baba Basra 75a). The Gemara relates that in the future age HaKadosh Baruch Hu will make canopies for the Tzadikim to commune with the Schina. Each Tzadik receives the canopy he deserves for his individual level of spiritual accomplishment. Each and every Tzadik burns, shamed by the canopy on the rung above him.

The Gemara's statement is open to the objection that the Tzadik on the top of the ladder has no one above him to put him to shame. This objection can be met by turning to another passage from the Gemara: *Rabbi Avahu said, they asked Shlomo [Hamelech], "Who is worthy of Olam Haba [- eternal reward]?" He replied, "Those sages who are honored by their contemporaries for their mastery of Torah." An example of such is Yosef the son of Rabbi Yehoshua. The son became ill and entered a lifeless state. When he came back to life, his father asked him what he had seen. He replied, "I saw the world upside down – the great here [in this world] are lowly*



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there, and the lowly here are great there.” His father said, “You saw things as they are in reality. Where were the Torah sages in your vision?” The son answered, “They have the same status there as they have here. I also heard it announced that Jewish martyrs have a unique place reserved for them.” (Baba Basra 10b).

Rabbi Yosef, under the impression that the standards of merit in this world are the same as in the next, thought things were upside down. His father corrected him: what counts in the next world is effort and not results. The gifted but lazy may gain prestige for their accomplishments in this world, but it is the diligent who will be rewarded in the next. Tosafos (loc.cit. sv. *Elyonim*) cite a received tradition to make the point: *[I saw] the great were lowly and the lowly were great - Rabbeinu Hananel explained this statement as follows. The Gaonim knew through the chain of tradition that [Rabbi Yosef] saw the Amora Shmuel sitting before his own student Rav Yehuda. [Rav Yehuda deserved to rise above Shmuel] because he had on one occasion reproved his Rabbi for ignoring the pleas of an indigent woman for assistance. In the next world, those who fulfilled their potential rise above those who did not, and suffer no shame. But those who did not fulfill their potential burn in their own private Gehinom, shamed by those who perfected themselves.*

Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai feared that he had not made full use of the talents HaKadosh Baruch Hu had given him. His thought back to his encounter with Vespasian. The newly-chosen Roman Emperor had offered to grant him any request. Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai replied, “Give me Yavneh and its Sages.” Why did he



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not have the presence of mind to ask for Jerusalem to be spared? The failure weighed on him. Was it his fault for not living up to his potential, or were the sins of an unworthy generation to blame? Should the failure be his, then he would suffer the shame of his own private Gehinom in the world to come; but should he be blameless, having perfected his character in this world, then he would enjoy unqualified eternal reward. The appearance of Chezkia the King of Yehuda decided the issue. King Chezkia raised a generation where Torah knowledge on the highest level was universal, something no one before him had accomplished. That achievement required King Chezkia to exploit his G-d given gifts of wisdom and leadership to the full. Chezkia came to escort his counterpart Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai to his rightful place in the world to come.

May it be His will that each and every one of us fulfill his G-d given potential and reach his own individual perfection – amen.

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