

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Beshalach

As children, we heard the legends of the righteous people. Perhaps we were told the tales of the thirty-six hidden tzaddikim. We were taught about the great role models of the Jewish people. We were informed of the saintly men and the virtuous women. Defining who is righteous and what is saintly is a task for which many people are ill equipped. Direction for how one goes from being a good person, to becoming a great person, is often lacking. There is a Midrash in our parsha that provides us some insight that will enable us to walk on the "Path of the Just."

Parshat Beshalach is highlighted by the *Song of the Sea*, the *Shirat haYam*. It is the poetic song the people chanted to G-d upon being saved from the marauding Egyptian hoards who chased them into the Red Sea; which, after parting ways to allow the Israelites passage, drowned their pursuers [see Exodus 14:9-15:1].

The *Song of the Sea* is the people's gratitude to G-d for saving them from the Egyptians. One of the better known lines of the song is: "*zeh Keli vianveihu* – This is my G-d and I will glorify Him" (ibid. 15:2).

The Medrash finds deeper meaning in these words. The Torah [Deuteronomy 6] exhorts us to "Walk on His path." This is akin to the idea of what the people were actually proclaiming at the splitting of the sea: "*Vianveihu* – and I will glorify Him" is actually a compound word "Ani viHu - He and I;" I will make myself similar to Him. How does this happen and what is expected of us? The Talmud [Shabbat 122b] teaches a number of examples of character traits that G-d has, and which we can potentially share. For instance, just as G-d is merciful; similarly, we too should be merciful. Another example, just as G-d is gracious, we too, should be gracious. In a sense, the people, by proclaiming "*zeh Keli vianveihu* – This is my G-d and I will glorify Him" were committing themselves to be like G-d.

The obvious question is, how one does one become merciful and gracious? It may sound like an easy undertaking, but truth to be told, changing one's self is extraordinarily difficult. Rabbi Yisroel Salanter is reported to have said that studying the entirety of the Talmud is an easier task than changing the smallest part of one's character.

There is another source in the Sages' writing that sheds some light on the concept of being G-dlike. From its text we will see an approach to change. The Talmud [Sotah 14a] teaches:

R. Hama son of R. Hanina further said: What means the text: Ye shall walk after the Lord your G-d? Is it, then, possible for a human being to walk after the *Shechinah* [G-d's presence]; for has it not been said: For the Lord your G-d is a devouring fire? But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked... so shall you also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick... so shall you also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners... so shall you also comfort mourners. The Holy one, blessed be He, buried the dead, ... so shall you also bury the dead.



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Some commentaries see a contradiction between these two pieces of Talmud. The Source in Shabbat indicates that walking on G-d's path requires one to be gracious, whilst the source in Sotah indicates that walking on G-d's path requires that one behave in a proscribed manner. Is it just our behavior that G-d desires or is it something deeper?

There is an approach to answer this contradiction that will also shed some light on our earlier questions. Namely, how does one go from being good to great? How does one become truly righteous? And how does one truly change themselves? In short, how does one fulfill the precept of "*Ani viHu* - He and I; I will make myself similar to Him?"

Generally Judaism takes a behavioral approach to change. The *Sefer haChinuch* writes [Positive Commandment #216]:

"G-d wants his chosen nation to be crowned with all of the precious and good traits possible. He wants them to have a soul that overflows with goodness and a giving heart..." It is through one's activities that they are changed. The behaviors impact the soul and change the person [emotionally]; this allows them to be fitting receptacles for G-d's blessing.

Let us use an example to illustrate our point. The *Mishna* [Ethics of the Fathers (3:15)] teaches: "Everything is determined according to the majority of actions." Maimonides explains that positive qualities are not gained through significant and big actions but rather through many actions. Repetition of activity ingrains the person with a sense of change. For instance, if someone wants to become a giver - meaning he/she is naturally miserly and wants to change their essence, it is not enough for him/her to give \$1000 to one person at one time. Rather, he/she should give \$1 to 1000 different people. This repetition of action is what changes the person from being miserly to being generous.

Let us use mercy as an example of a character trait one desires to change. One does not become merciful by simply deciding to be more merciful. One can change one's self through many repeated actions, to the extent that one can become a merciful person. Our behavior determines our reality. The Talmud is thus actually teaching us a fundamental lesson about change. Regardless of how you currently feel, behave in a specified manner. Clothe the naked. Visit the ill. Bury the dead. Comfort the mourners. If you act like this, you will become a merciful person. You will become more G-d-like and you will then be walking on the path of G-d.

This is the path of the just. This is the way that one goes from being good, or even less than good, to becoming great. This is how one becomes righteous and saint-like. This is how one becomes like Him, thus fulfilling the dictum of *imitatio Dei*.

Shabbat Shalom

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