

Seudat Shlishit Dvar Torah

Mom's First Yahrzeit – Rut bat Yosef Eliezer HaKohen v'Breindel

Shabbat Lech Lecha 5785 – Maimonides Kehillah

Over this past year, I've thought a lot about my mother, a"h. There are those who say that the recitation of Kaddish is a way of remembering your loved one. However, it wasn't really the saying of Kaddish per se, but rather the thoughts and feelings that preceded the recitation that triggered a flood of memories for me that often ranged from the more recent to the dimmer past.

It's so true what Chazal say that the mention of Ima should precede Abba in the pasuk in VaYiqra 19: "אִישׁ אָמוֹ וְאָבִיו תִּירָאוּ וְאֶת־שִׁבְתֵּי תִשְׁמְרוּ" that a person should first be in all-enveloping awe and reverence towards their mother first and foremost.

We know that the bond between a mother and her child is one of the strongest in existence. Each of us here was biologically linked to our mother. Each of us here was nourished by our mother even before being born. We were kept warm and we were cushioned. And, after our birth, as we continued to grow, for most of us, and most certainly for me, the love of a mother for her child influenced me in so very many ways.

At this time, for her first yahrzeit, I want to focus on one small part of her personality, her joy in being an Ovedet HaShem; of living an authentic Jewish life.

The Sfas Emes, in his monumental Payrush Al HaTorah, presents a fascinating outlook on a dimension of our Avodas HaShem, not on what we have to do, but rather, on how we perform what we do. The second pasuk of Birchas Kohanim reads: "Yisa HaShem Panav EyLecha" which can be translated as "may HaShem lift up His face towards you" – this is a remarkable theological statement – that, as it were, HaShem "turns from doing something else and looks at you". HaShem is paying direct attention to you, to you alone at that moment of "Nesiat Panim". What an incredible experience!

Yet, he points out, in Devarim we read "asher lo yisa panim". HaShem is also a Being who does not look towards specific people meaning that He does not pick favorites, He does not pay more attention to one person over another.

To resolve this apparent contradiction, the Sfas Emes continues to quote from the Midrash in Bamidbar Rabbah: "HaShem shows favor to us/looks at us when we do what we are supposed to, k'she-osin retzono shel maqom. HaShem shows us no favor when we do not do what we are supposed to.

OK – we get it – HaShem aligns his "favor-meter" based upon our actions – we are doing good and HaShem looks towards us; we are not doing as good as we should and HaShem looks, kaviyachol, away from us.

But, there is a deeper question here. If we are doing what we are supposed to, if our behavior and our intentions are for the right purposes and goals, then why do we need “n’siat panim”. After all, we are already doing the right thing – we are already pointed in the right direction.

Answers the Gerrer Rebbe, it is that HaShem is accepting the little bits of good that we do as if we have done a lot of good. The Midrash Tanchuma quotes the Gemara in Berachot 20b:

דַּרְשׁ רַב עֲוִירָא, זְמַנִּין אָמַר לֵה מְשָׁמִיָּה דְרַבִּי אַמִּי וְזְמַנִּין אָמַר לֵה מְשָׁמִיָּה דְרַבִּי אֲסִי: אָמְרוּ מַלְאָכֵי הַשָּׁרֵת לְפָנָי הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא: רַבּוֹנוּ שְׁלַ עוֹלָם, כְּתוּב בְּתוֹרָתְךָ “אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים וְלֹא יִקַּח שֹׁחַד”, וְהִלֵּא אֲתָה נוֹשֵׂא פָנִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, דְּכָתִיב: “יִשָּׂא ה’ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ”? אָמַר לְהֵם: וְכִי לֹא אֲשָׂא פָנִים לְיִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׂכַתְבְּתִי לְהֵם בְּתוֹרָה “וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה’ אֱלֹהֶיךָ”, וְהֵם מְדַקְדְּקִים [עַל] עֲצָמָם עַד כְּזֹאת וְעַד כְּבִיצָה.

Rav Avira taught, sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Ami, and sometimes he said it in the name of Rabbi Asi: The ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, in Your Torah it is written: “The great, mighty and awesome God **who favors no one and takes no bribe**” (Deuteronomy 10:17), **yet You**, nevertheless, **show favor to Israel, as it is written: “The Lord shall show favor to you and give you peace**” (Numbers 6:26). **HaShem replied to the angels: And how can I not show favor to Israel, as I wrote for them in the Torah: “And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God**” (Deuteronomy 8:10), meaning that there is no obligation to bless the Lord until one is satiated; **yet they are exacting with themselves** to recite Grace after Meals even if they have eaten **as much as an olive-bulk or an egg-bulk**. Since they go beyond the requirements of the law, they are worthy of favor.

This is what it means for HaShem to show extra favor to His people. It can be when one rejoices in the smallest opportunity to do good and finds the good in even the smallest places. This attribute is actually dependent on a person’s perspective. If a person is happy at being able to follow HaShem’s path in even a small way, HaShem finds the performance of that mitzvah-act so very precious. This kind of joy reflects the inner essence of an individual for this joy emanates from the core of a person. You cannot bottle it and you cannot spread it – you can just share it or observe it in another person’s approach to their Avodas HaShem.

The concept of “nesiat panim” regarding the relationship between HaShem and Bney Yisrael cannot be understood in a superficial manner as if to say that HaShem is giving us something we don’t deserve. Rather, to the extent that a person themselves is joyful when doing the good that they do and they truly express gratitude to merit the opportunity to follow the way of the Torah in small or big ways, So does HaShem accept them with joy.

It is not so much the quantity of any mitzvah we do, but rather the emotional investment, the intentionality, and the focus that demonstrates a true commitment. HaShem sees directly into our hearts and knows what we felt when we performed a good deed, when we followed the derech HaShem. To the extent that a person rejoices in the good that they do, so HaShem reacts to them with “sever panim yafot” – with a turning of the head towards them and showing them the “face” of HaShem.

My mother, from the small, rural village of Wehrda in central Germany, had at her core, an approach to Jewish life that exemplified the principle of “osin retzono shel maqom”. She learned everyday Jewish practice from her parents and relatives, and after escaping from Germany at the age of 9 just before Kristallnacht, continued to sharpen her Jewish instincts in her schooling years in the Washington Heights community of Manhattan.

Our mother’s respectful and dignified manner when in shul and during her davening, her mastery of the foods and smells of the German-Jewish kitchen, and her skills in using her hands in the creation of embroidered tablecloths, kippot, talitot, and their “zekelach” were all reflections of a resolute and committed Jew who relished living a Jewish life in the service of the Ribbono Shel Olam. And she did all of these b’sever panim yafot and with a dedication to r’tzono shel maqom.

Regardless of whether she was adding another plate to the table as my father had brought a dinner guest home from the JCC where he worked or whether she was stitching up a torn Torah Mantel, or whether she was assisting an adult learner to use a full-size loom to create a personalized tallis, she radiated a joy in the performance of each mitzvah-act. I truly believe that this joy came from deep inside her.

She realized and taught her four children that living a Jewish life requires focus and concentration and that there are so many ways to express the beauty of the Mitzvot. She loved being from a Jewish family and being part of a tzibbur. She loved creating her own Jewish family with my father, a”h. At her very core was a simcha shel mitzvah and HKBH blessed her with long life, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

There is so much negativity and criticism in our world. There is fighting and there is hatred. Mom looked at the world in terms of “what can I do to keep my family strong and committed”. What can I do to leverage my G-d given talents to improve that which is around me, that which I can influence? What can I do to perform these activities from a perspective of deep joy and resolute commitment? And, throughout her life, the relationships that she cultivated from the earliest moments of her children’s existence resulted in the strongest of mother-child bond. It is deep and lasting.

The pasuk tells us in Parashas Lech Lecha that just after Avram’s name is upgraded to Avraham, he is blessed with the bracha of **מְאֹד בְּמֵאֹד אֶתְּךָ בְּהַפְרֵתִי** meaning that he will be exceedingly fertile or fruitful. Asks the Netziv, R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin in his epic commentary HaEmek Davar, – why did Avraham need this Beracha about having many descendants – Avraham had just been told **כִּי אֲבִי-הַמְּנוֹן גּוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ** that he would be the progenitor of many nations of people!

Answers the Netziv (writing in the latter half of the 19th century) - **אלא לצורך ענין החדש** - that there is a new element being added by this second beracha. **That the Jewish people, the descendants of Avraham Avinu, will spread out into every corner of the world באופן .** **שיהי' פרה ורבה בכל חלקי העולם** . **בכח זרע אברהם להשכיל את כל הגוים.** in such a way that the influence of Jewish values and practice will inform and ennoble nations across the globe.

May my family continue to be blessed by the deep and lasting memories of Rut bas Yosef Eliezer.
May we all merit to continue to spread the message of Yahadus, its values and philosophy in ever
expanding ripples from within ourselves to our families, our community, and our world.

Shabbat Shalom