

Knowing where we stand

Jesse Hefter, November 2021

How often is it in life that we see a word or phrase in our Tefila or in our reading of the Torah and we ask ourselves - why didn't I see more in this word and its repercussive echoes in the liturgy, the Bible, and, even more importantly, in our lives?

In Bereishit 22:5, on their way to Har HaMoriyah, Avraham tells his entourage: "Stay here with the donkey and the young man and I will go to there, we will bow down (v'nishtachaveh) and we will return to you."

The Midrash Rabba (Bereishit 56), in commenting on the word, v'nishtachaveh, presents a mind-bending understanding: says Rabbi Yitzchak - Hakol bizchut hishtachavaya - everything happens in the merit of bowing/hishtachvaya. He brings a number of stirring examples from Jewish history.

- 1) Avraham and Yitzchak return in peace/shalom from their ascent to Mount Moriah. Why? v'nishtachaveh (Bereishit 22:5).
- 2) The Jewish people were freed from bondage in Egypt. Why? vayiqdu vayishtachavu (Shmot 4:31).
- 3) The Jewish people received the Torah at Har Sinai. Why? v'hishtachavisem mayrachok (Shmot 24:1).
- 4) The Jewish people will one day be gathered from all corners of the world back to Eretz Yisrael. Why? v'hishtachavu laHaShem behar haqodesh (Yeshayahu 27:13).

Asks the Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky (1911-2000), in his Netivot Shalom (Bereishit, p. 122), what is the essence of Torah - what is the purpose of all that we do as Jews? In a nutshell, our goal is to draw closer to God (uvo tidbak (Devarim 10:20)). He explains that the full force of the mitzvot are to serve as guideposts to us on our journey of forever coming closer to God. With full realization that reaching full dvekut is difficult if not impossible, he presents an alternative pathway - the level of self-awareness in which we recognize our place in the universe relative to a divine Being (hitbatlut). When we release ourselves to God and God's plans, we simultaneously draw closer to God. He explains that this level of awareness is a key aspect of hishtachavaya.

The High Priest on Yom Kippur would prostrate himself in front of the Aron Qodesh as part of the Temple service. At that moment, he would stretch out his arms to his sides and his legs behind him and was fully horizontal on the floor. What was going through his mind at this holiest of moments? That all that he represents to God on behalf of himself, his family, and his nation is only due to God's blessing.

So, what really matters to God is not outwardly expressions of dedication to the Divine but an internal, self-awareness of our place before the Divine. The Kozhnitz Maggid (Rabbi Yisroel Hopstein, 1737-1814) used the following proof from our Shabbat Tefila - a phrase within the beautiful paragraph of Nishmat kol chai. There, we exclaim: vechol komah l'fanecha tishtachaveh - and all who are standing will bow before you. The phrase suggests that one can bow while standing upright. How? By being mindful, while standing, of our existential being and our place before God.

When Avraham reaches Har Hamoriyah, we read of all the actions he performed. Why does the Torah not tell us that he bowed? Perhaps it is because he didn't physically bow when at the mountaintop.

Rather, he focused and internalized his relationship with the divine and resolved to tap his reservoir of faith to overcome his present challenge. On the one hand, God promises him that with his legacy will continue through his son Yitzchak; yet on the other hand, God instructs him now to present this son as a human sacrifice. No amount of bowing, comments the Slonimer, can blunt the agony of this father's dilemma, of his utter fear and despair. Instead, Avraham stands before God as a tamim - a person of wholeness, a person of faith; a person of commitment to something much grander than just himself and his family.

Can this be what the Midrash means by: everything happens in the merit of hishtachavaya? This was the source of strength for Avraham at this ultimate test of his service and dedication to the Divine.

Many pathways present themselves before us in terms of hishtachavaya. At times, we feel confident and sure about our station in life and know without a doubt that God is around us. We can more easily approach God; we feel close to the Divine. Our service of God may come more easily and our God-mindfulness cascades through us.

However, there are times when we feel abandoned and lonely, bereft of God's blessing and concern. We may then feel a sense not only of physical distance but of spiritual disconnection. We may then turn to the Divine but feel small and insignificant, of being forgotten. Even here, however, the option of mental rather than physical hishtachavaya presents itself to us. Recognizing our place within the bigger world can help to ground us and provide us with renewed faith.

In the Yom Tov Musaf service, we recite: v'ayn anachnu yecholim laalot, v'layraot, ul'hishtachavot lefanecha - we are presently unable to ascend (to Yerushalayim and the Temple) to be seen (by You) and to bow down before You. Comments the Slonimer: I understand that in the absence of the Temple, we cannot travel up to Yerushalayim and be seen in the Temple courtyard on the Chag but what is preventing us from bowing down before God?

He answers that in the absence of the Temple, we cannot presently approach God at the highest level of hishtachavaya - that level was only accessible to the Jewish people when we prayed at the Temple and the closeness of God was so much more palpable and present. Rabbeynu Yona (in Shaarei HaAvodah, Letter 5) comments that being on the Temple Mount on one of the Jewish festivals was similar in holiness and devekut to the experience of receiving the Torah on Har Sinai. We were so close to God that we were able to see the sound of His words (Shmot 20:15). At an experience like the giving/sharing of the Torah we could experience hishtachavaya at its highest-level stemming from a all-consuming love and awe of the Divine.

Rabbi Berezovsky expands our understanding of this important kind of mindfulness by reminding us that each of us, in any situation in which we find ourselves, can experience the sense of self-awareness of our relationship with God that can help lift us in times of challenge. In all the cases listed in the Midrash, it was the actualization of this sense of place vis-a-vis God that enabled good things to happen on a national/global scale.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that, at the Akedah, God removed, as it were, all of Avraham's spiritual achievements and understandings. Avraham's test was more acute, more challenging. At that moment with his spiritual moorings disconnected, where was he to look for help? It was at that moment that

Avraham exclaimed to his fellow travelers, v'nishtachaveh v'nashuva aleychem - we will bow/hishtachavaya and we will return to you (in peace and blessing).

Perhaps in our current world of constant challenges, be them political, personal, ecological, or economic, we need to remember the feeling one gets when standing at the ocean's edge and peering towards the horizon and realizing how small we really are and how much we depend on others around us and Divine blessing. When we, like Avraham did so long ago, look up to the night sky and see the constellations of stars and ponder our present and future and our place within the cosmos, we can learn to remain mindful of where we fit into the bigger picture of humanity and exercise more humility and kindness to those around us.

Hakol bizchut hishtachavaya.