

Siyum – Masechet Chullin

Shabbat Shuvah – Ha-Azinu

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The Talner Rebbe was fond of saying that there are no coincidences. Everything that we experience in our lives is preordained in some unexplainable way. Hakol BeeDay Shamayim Chutz MiYiras Shamayim.

The confluence of a Siyum on Masechet Chullin and Shabbat Shuvah underscores the Rebbe's point. Completing a massive learning project such as the Daf Yomi on 141 double-sided pages of complex Talmud and starting Masechet Bechorot is a perfect instantiation of our process of Teshuvah. We look at the actions and scenes that played out during the last year and, during these blessed days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we begin again.

Chullin stretches across 12 Perakim and it is worth noting the major topics that are introduced.

1. Shechitah (both for animals and birds)
2. The Shochet
3. 18 categories of defects that render an animal treif and signs used to distinguish kosher species of birds, fish, and grasshoppers
4. Status of an embryo or fetus found inside an animal that was slaughtered
5. Oto v'et Bno – slaughtering an animal and its offspring on the same day
6. Covering the blood after shechting undomesticated kosher animals (deer) and kosher birds
7. Gid HaNasheh – the prohibition of eating the sciatic nerve located in the hind quarters of animals
8. The prohibition of cooking meat and milk together, eating the mixture, and deriving any benefit from such mixture
9. The characterization of different parts of the animal (skin, bones, hoofs, etc.) regarding whether they are meat with regards to kosher laws
10. Gifts to the Kohen of the right foreleg, the cheeks, and the abomasum (maw) of a chullin animal that is slaughtered
11. The din of Reishit HaGez – the first of the fleece
12. The din of Shiluach HaKen – Sending away the mother before taking the chicks or eggs)

The Gemara brings a case one Amud before the end of the Masechta about a father who asked his son to procure a bird for him from their rooftop dovecote.

Says the Gemara:

תניא, רבי יעקב אומר: אין לך כל מצוה ומצוה שבתורה שמתן שכרה בצדה, שאין תחית המתים תלויה בה. בכבוד אב ואם כתיב: "למען יאריך ימיו ולמען ייטב לך", בשילוח הקן כתיב: "למען ייטב לך והארכת ימים".

And R. Yakov provides the following seemingly problematic incident:

הרי שאמר לו אביו: עליה לבירה והביא לי גוזלות! ועלה, ושלח את האם ולקח את הבנים, ובחזרתו נפל ומת. היכן אריכות ימיו של זה? והיכן טובתו של זה? אלא "למען יאריך ימיו" – בעולם שכולו ארוך, "ולמען ייטב לך" – לעולם שכולו טוב.

The Gemara questions whether this incident really ever occurred as it seems to be contrived to prove a point. The answer provided is that R. Yakov saw this with his own eyes.

Can bad things happen in this world? Of course, they can. Do good things happen in this world? Of course, they do.

Judaism, according to the Rav, rejects naïve, mechanical theodicy. If the young man climbed down a rickety ladder and fell leading to his death, that is physical causality.

In a beautiful description of the process of Teshuva, the Rav explains how HaShem often tempers the punishment we might deserve by reducing it to an almost insignificant event. The Rav asks in the last essay in Al HaTeshuvah (Kaparrah, Yissurim, U-Geulah) – what is the principle of “Mashehu” in the realm of Halacha?

He outlines that, within the concept of Melech Mochel v’Soleach, there are three fundamental understandings of Mashehu:

1. The principle of Tzimtzum is based on the Pasuk: “Gadol Adoneinu v’Rav Koach, Litvunaso Ayn Mispar”.
2. The principle of Pidyom or Chalifin: The source is the action that Avraham Avinu took at the Akeda where we read “VaYelech Avraham VaYikach et HaAyil VaYaleyhu L’Olah Tachat Bno”.
3. The principle of Goral/destiny: The source is a resonant act of our Avodat Shel Yom Hakkipurim – the taking of lots for the Seir HaMishtalech. The source reads: V’natan Aharon Al Shney HaSeirim Goralot – Goral Echad LaHashem v;Goral Echad La’Azazel.

Let's drill down into the first principle. Part of the beauty of our teshuvah process is the recognition that, all during the year, actions that we might have performed that would lead to a more severe response from HaShem, are rather responded to with a "Mashehu" – a smaller, maybe even a symbolic response. For example, we might just miss an MBTA bus or train by a minute. Alternatively, one might be tying a tie and have the two lengths end up offset to the point where one needs to completely untie what was done and start from the beginning. In cases such as this, explains the Rav, we believe that these "Mashehu" moments are a Chessed rather than an Onesh. We recognize every day of our lives that the Divine Plan is thoroughly inscrutable and it is our mission to strive for Kedushah and Devaykus whether the path is reasonably straight and simple or winding and complex.

Mashehu moments are all around us. HaShem's rachamim does not promise an automatic suspension of physics or mortality. In fact, as we will see next, while suffering in this world and the vulnerabilities of our physical selves are part of this lifetime, Chullin 142 concludes that spiritual reconciliation and the true responses to our action in this lifetime are fully realized in a different plane of reality – that of Olam HaBa.

The Masechta concludes with the story of Elisha Ben Abuya referred to as "Acher/the other". Acher was a Bayis Sheni Tanna. Upon seeing profound theological contradictions he unfortunately turned away from Yahadut.

The Gemara suggests that he was intensely bothered by at least two events:

1. The case we learned a few minutes ago about the son dying on his return trip from performing two Mitzvot that promise long life (Kibbud Av VaEm and Shiluach HaKen) and
2. אָמַר רַב יוֹסֵף : אֵלְמָלָא דִּרְשִׁיָּה אַחֵר לְהָאִי קָרָא כְּרַבִּי יַעֲקֹב בֶּר בְּרִיתִיהָ – לָא חָטָא. מַאי חֲזָא? אֵיכָא דְאָמְרִי : כִּי הָאִי מַעֲשֶׂה חֲזָא, וְאֵיכָא דְאָמְרִי : לִישָׁנָא דְרַבִּי חִוּצְפִית הַמְתִּירָגְמֵן חֲזָא, דְהִנּוּ מוּטְלָת בְּאַשְׁפָּה. אָמַר : פָּה שְׁהִפִּיק מְרַגְלִיּוֹת וְלַחוּדָא עָפֵר?! וְהוּא לָא יָדַע "לְמַעַן יִיטֵב לָךְ" – בְּעוֹלָם שְׂכוּלוֹ טוֹב, "וְלְמַעַן יֵאָרִיכוֹן יָמֶיךָ" – בְּעוֹלָם שְׂכוּלוֹ אַרְוֵךְ.

The Rav emphasized that the metaphysical question of "Why did this happen" (this is an unsolvable problem for us) should be a religiously active and moral question – "Now that bad things happen, what is my duty to respond to it". We are all soldiers in the army of HaShem. In our present reality, soldiers in an army carefully and explicitly respond to their commanding officer.

Al Achas Kama vKama do we need to always reflect on what HaShem is asking of us when something bad happens to us or to others. Darchei HaShem Mistarin – God's ways are

mysteriously invisible to us. But our pathway to human greatness is paved with Teshuva, Tefilah and Tzedakah. May we all be inscribed in the Sefer HaChayim for a 5787 full of bracha, health, and a re-energized realization of the influence of Torah and its teachings in our lives.