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ACHAREI MOS: GETTING CLOSER TO HASHEM

In *Parshas Achrei Mos*, the Torah says that the two sons of Aharon [Nadav and Avihu] died “in their drawing close in front of Hashem”.

The *Ramchal* in the beginning of *Mesillas Yesharim* writes that the true *shleimus* (self-perfection) of life is to reach *d'veykus* (attachment) with Hashem, and this is what Dovid HaMelech said, “And as for me, closeness to Hashem is good.” The purpose of Creation in general and for man specifically is to reach closeness to Hashem.

This is what Nadav and Avihu died for. They reached what is described in the verse “And as for me, closeness to Hashem is good” and since they had now reached this purpose, they left the world – they died “in their drawing close to Hashem”.

There is nothing for us to do here on this world other than to reach closeness with Hashem. All creations, and man especially, exists in order to bring the world to its purpose that all of Creation should reach closeness with Hashem.

At first glance, it seems from *sefer Mesillas Yesharim* that closeness to Hashem cannot be reached until one reaches the level of *kedushah* (holiness), which the *Ramchal* describes as “a constant con-

nection in the Creator, without interruption.” It seems that the order of our *avodah* is Torah, then *zebirus* (watchfulness), *zerizus* (alacrity), etc., whereas *d'veykus* and closeness with Hashem can only be reached at the very end. That is certainly what it seems like when we take a look at *sefer Mesillas Yesharim*, which lays out the steps of our ladder of growth.

However, there is another way to look at it. When you draw close to something, you aren't at your goal yet, but you have gotten closer. Every movement in life must constantly be towards more and more closeness with Hashem, until we truly reach Him: “Return, Yisrael, until Hashem your G-d.” At that highest level, a person can reach the level of the *tzaddikim* who have constant *d'veykus* and closeness with Hashem, but as long as a person is directing his life towards Hashem, he is already closer to Hashem.

You can find closeness with Hashem, at any level, because you can keep coming closer to Him! Closeness with Hashem is not some far-off high level, but a level that one can keep reaching closer and closer to the *giluy yichudo Yisbarach*, “the revelation of His oneness.” (from *Bilvavi On The Parsha*) ■

KEDOSHIM: LIVING A LIFE OF PNIMIYUS

Parshas Kedoshim discusses the laws of “*kilayim*,” forbidden mixtures. The underlying theme of *kilayim* is that there are certain things which are meant to remain apart from each other which the Torah doesn’t want together.

The entire Creation is a mixture of good and evil, ever since Adam ate from the *Eitz HaDaas Tov V’Ra*. When Hashem placed Adam in Gan Eden, He showed him all the trees and said, “Look at all of this beautiful handiwork I have made. Give thought to this, and don’t ruin My world.” When Adam ate from the forbidden tree, not only did he sin and become removed from Gan Eden, but the state of the world was ruined with it.

What was wrong with the *Eitz HaDaas*? It was a form of *kilayim*, a forbidden mixture, because it contained a mixture of good and evil, two forces which are not meant to be together. *Kilayim* is therefore rooted in the evil mixture that was in the *Eitz HaDaas Tov V’Ra*. Ever since the first sin, we are living in one giant mixture of *kilayim*, a world of good and evil mixed together, which we need to constantly sift ourselves out from.

But the Torah is called the *Eitz HaChaim*. The Torah is the “Tree of Life” for all those who truly connect to it, and Torah is also called *chayei*

olam, “eternal life.” When one is truly attached to the Torah, he partakes of the *Eitz HaChaim*, and is connected with *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*. The Torah is the revelation of the *Eitz HaChaim* that was in *Gan Eden*.

Through truly connecting with the Torah, one becomes connected with Hashem, where everything is good since it is written “*In His place, evil shall not visit you.*” Evil cannot affect the place where one stands with Hashem.

The more that a person connects with the reality of Torah and with the reality of Hashem, with true *d’veykus*, he enters into the innermost chambers with Hashem, where there is no mixture of good and evil. There, one is at the state of the pure soul which Hashem created man with.

As long as a person hasn’t yet connected himself to the depths of Torah with *d’veykus* in Hashem, the life he lives is a mixture of good and evil, a life of “*kilayim*”. But when one accesses the inner world of *pnimiyus*, by connecting himself to the Torah, to Hashem’s true world - there, in that inner dimension, there is no mixture of good and evil. There is only good, for Torah is called *tov* (good), and it is a reality that is “entirely good”. (from *Bilvavi On The Parsha*) ■

Q&A THE GALUS AND TUMAH OF AMERICA

QUESTION What is the meaning of “*Galus America*,” a term that was coined by Rav Hutner? **ANSWER** “*Galus America*” means the exile of materialism, of glorifying *gashmiyus* and being firmly attached to it. Unlike the Greek exile, which was an exile of the “body,” in the sense that it glorified the wisdom of the physical body, the “exile of America” is rooted in attachment to materialism for its own sake. It resembles the verse, “*Feed me now, of this red stuff*” – an attachment to materialism itself. In America, the general attitude of people is to value others primarily on their financial success. Life in America mostly revolves around a very noticeable attachment to acquisitions. As a result, the “exile of America” is not an exile that restrains people [as in the previous exiles], but the opposite - it is focused on endlessly expanding one’s horizons to pursue more and more materialism to no end. Examples include [the pursuit] of owning a bigger house, the best and biggest household appliances, etc. It also includes the excessive attachment and indulgence in food. The more value people place on materialism, the more they pursue it. The emphasis on materialism [in America] therefore creates a very big pursuit of materialism for its own sake.

QUESTION I have noticed that there are Rabbonim who have smartphones (and I don’t even doubt for a second that it has nothing bad on it). What should be our attitude about this? Are they falling in to the *tumah* that’s in America without realizing it? **ANSWER** There is a certain *ruach* of *tumah*, a spirit of impurity (*tumah*) that pervades America,

which has created a different attitude in people already for many years now. It’s very accepted in America for people to study for a degree, to incorporate college into *yeshivos* so that yeshiva students can get degrees, and the like. And there are many other breaches in *tzniyus* (modesty) there, as well as the gross pursuit of luxury and comfort. This carefree attitude in America has continued and increased into becoming a general attitude where a person can find a *heter* (a *halachic* leniency) to sanction just about anything, and now this carefree attitude has become stronger. There are those who said that the level of the generation today resembles exactly what the generation looked like in Germany right before the Holocaust. Enough said. **QUESTION** How should we view the legalization of marijuana in America? Is there something else going on behind the scenes which Hashem is hinting something to us with this? **ANSWER** These drugs bring a person somewhat into the state of *lo yoda*, losing our logical awareness, and it is the *kelipah* (evil) side to the concept of transcending our *da’as* [it is the evil use of *lo yoda*, of transcending our logical awareness via the means of losing the mind]. **QUESTION** Is the legalization of marijuana another stage in the dominance of evil in our world today, another step within the *shaar HaNun d’tumah* which is in the world today, and is it a sign that our world is destroying itself (which will make way for the era of Mashiach)? **ANSWER** Yes, because [the use of drugs] is the evil, ruined side of “not knowing,” for it is the removal of

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da'as (logical reasoning). **QUESTION** How can we raise our children successfully in America with all the dangers they are facing in the next generation (besides for *davening* and crying for them)?

ANSWER Raise your children with love, patience, understanding, cleverness, giving, *davening* for them and crying tears for them. And have *emunah*.

QUESTION America is becoming more and more liberal and more accepting of deviant lifestyles. Are we supposed to talk to our children about these things?

ANSWER Explain to them very generally that we are living in the generation of the footsteps of Mashiach, and that all the *reshaim* of the past have come back again into our generation, and our generation contains even the *reshaim* of Sodom. However, make sure also to remind them always of Hashem's kindnesses to us.

QUESTION What exactly is the "*tumah*" which entered into the Torah world in recent years? **ANSWER** Media, which is the 50th level of *tumah*, the *kelipas Sodom* (immoral lifestyles) and all that's included in this.

QUESTION If a person follows the news by listening to the radio and reading the *frum* newspapers (which are getting all of their news from the media), does that also connect him to the 50th level of *tumah*? **ANSWER**

He is not included in that category of being connected with the 50th level of *tumah*, but he is certainly endangering himself a lot with this.

QUESTION The "50th level of *tumah*" has already enveloped us for many years, especially in America. It's very common today that *bnai Torah* grew up in homes where the parents did not have the most appro-

priate Torah atmosphere and because of that, many *bnai Torah* grew up with TV and unfiltered Internet and already from their childhood they have seen the worst things possible. Where is all of our *bechirah* in this? **ANSWER** Every person, even in this generation, has *bechirah* (the ability to choose). But certainly the *nekudas habechirah*, the "point of free will" that each person has in this generation is different than the *bechirah* of previous generations. The main *bechirah* (choice) in this generation which is needed today is to use the power of *mesirus nefesh* (giving up one's will and dedicating one's life to Hashem), which is able to uproot even the powerful *tumah* in today's times.

QUESTION How can we have any *simchas bachaim*, how can we be happy and serve Hashem *b'simchah*, when there's so much *tumah* in America? **ANSWER** You should keep alternating back and forth between 1- feeling disconnected from everything in your surroundings, and 2- having *emunah* (faith in Hashem) that it's ultimately all the will of Hashem, Who says, "*I am Hashem, Who dwells amongst them amidst their impurity.*" Keep going back and forth between these two different states [being inwardly disconnected from your surroundings, and the *emunah* of believing that it's all part of Hashem's plan]. Make sure to have fixed time every day where you can 1- get in touch with your *emunah* in Hashem that this is all His will, and 2- feeling an inward disconnection from your surroundings. This cycle enables you to use your *bechirah*. ■

PESACH SHEINI NO SUCH THING AS BEING DISTANT

Regarding the *mitzvah* to bring the offering of “*Pesach Sheini*”, the Torah says that anyone who became “defiled” [due to contamination from a human corpse] or anyone who couldn’t make it to Jerusalem for the festival of Pesach because he was on a distant road and couldn’t make it on time it, was allowed to bring the Pesach offering on the day on the 14th day of the month of *Iyar*).¹

What does it mean that the person was found on a “distant road” [and thus couldn’t make it]?

The *Gemara* says that if Adam wouldn’t have sinned, he would have entered into a day that is entirely Shabbos.² Thus, in a sense, ever since the sin of Adam, mankind is found on a very long, “distant road”, far away from the purpose of Creation, and this “distant road” has lasted so far for thousands of years. At the giving of the Torah, the effects of the sin were removed from mankind³, and we would have entered into *Eretz Yisrael* immediately, if not for the sin with the golden calf. Thus, ever since the sin of Adam (and later by sinning with the golden calf), we have been greatly distanced from our purpose.

Pesach Sheini reveals that even though you are found on a path that is far

from the purpose of Creation, or even if your soul has become “defiled” (as the Torah says, that *Pesach Sheini* is for those who have either become defiled from a corpse, or who weren’t able to make it to Jerusalem for the festival, because they were far away), this distance or defilement is only temporary. The defilement which we are found in, and the distance which we have been placed in, can only last for the duration of the current era, which is called the *shis alfn*, the “6,000 years”.

Although sin has made man defiled and it has distanced man from Hashem, and our spiritual light has dimmed, Hashem still did not take away our light completely. Eventually, we will get to our goal – it is just that we have been temporarily distanced. The nations of the world think that Hashem has abandoned the Jewish people. This is what Pharaoh, Haman and other enemies of the Jewish people thought, and that is why they thought they could destroy us. But in truth, Hashem has not abandoned us; although we appear that the Jewish people are found on a “distant road” far from Hashem, the distance is not actually a distance – for we are really very close to reaching [our purpose, which is our ultimate level of closeness with] Hashem.

There are really two attitudes which deter one from reaching his purpose: Either because a person feels “defiled”

1 *Bamidbar* 9:10

2 *Talmud Bavli: Tractate Sanhedrin*

38a

3 *Shabbos* 88a

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in his soul, due to the effects of sin; or because one feels as if he is on a “distant road”, far away from Hashem.

However, the *Gemara* says that “There is a barrier of iron that separates the Jewish people and Hashem.”⁴ A person can be very close to his purpose in life (closeness and attachment with Hashem), but is just that he is separated by the “barrier of iron.” The “barrier” itself creates a distance between him and Hashem. But this is not an actual distance. It is just a “barrier” that has been placed between us and Hashem, and our work is merely to remove this “barrier”! So our ‘distance’ from Hashem is not a real distance. There is simply a “barrier” in the way which is preventing us from drawing close.⁵

Pesach Sheini reveals the spiritual light that this barrier or distance does not create an actual separation between man and Hashem. ...

The very long and distant path that we have taken for these last 6,000 years can entirely be “bypassed”, in one moment - if we reveal *mesirus nefesh*. This was the revelation of *Pesach Sheini*: that what seems like a “distant road” – a hint to this 6,000 year period we are in – in one moment, it can all become a path that is very close [to Hashem].

CONCLUSION Thus, on a deeper level, those who couldn't bring the *korbon pesach* because they were defiled, or because they were on a distant road, are commanded by the Torah [in the times of the *Beis HaMikdash*] to bring a second *pesach* offering, on the day of *Pesach Sheini*, to show that **there is really no such thing as being completely distanced from Hashem.** In the truer, higher dimension of reality, there is nothing that actually divides us and Hashem! In other words, when one is in a state of defilement of the soul, which is caused by sins, or if he is seemingly on a “distant road” that seems “far away” from Hashem, he is really only a very short distance from Hashem. In actuality, we are really close to reaching Him.

This is the deep implication of *Pesach Sheini*, which is rooted in the deaths of Nadav and Avihu, and this is also the path of Elazar ben Dordaya, of which Rebbi said, “There are those who merit their world in one moment.”⁶ For this same reason, the sage Rebbi viewed *Pesach Sheini* as a “festival that stands on its own”⁷, which, on a deeper level, implies that the perception offered by *Pesach Sheini* is a new revelation, a whole new dimension of a festival, for the Jewish people. Excerpt from the hebrew shiur פסח שני פתח 017 פסח א חדש תשע"א ■

4 *Berachos* 32b

5 *Editor's Note: Refer to the Rav's Reaching Your Essence (chapter 5)*

6 *Avodah Zarah* 17a

7 *Pesachim* 93a

THE SPECIAL TIME OF LAG BAOMER

It is written in the *Midrash* “For every time.”¹ Chazal explain that there was a time for Adam to enter *Gan Eden*, and there was a time for him to leave *Gan Eden*; there was a time for Noach to enter the Ark, and there was a time for him to leave the Ark. There was a time for Avraham to be circumcised, and there was a time for him to circumcise his children.”

We can learn from this *Midrash* that long before Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai passed away on *Lag BaOmer*, this day was already sanctified. Thus, our outlook on this day doesn't have to begin with Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who definitely brought the meaning of this special time into the dimension of the soul as well, because long before he lived, this day was already precious. It was a day that inherently contained spiritual gifts. What is the inner meaning of this day?

LAG BAOMER AND AMALEK

Lag BaOmer is on the 18th day of the month of Iyar. The *gematria* of the word “*Iyar*,” together with the number 18, is equal to the word “*Amalek*.” Thus, here is a connection between Amalek & this day.

1 *Koheles* 3:1

2 Numerical value of *Iyar* is $221+18 = 239$. The word “*Amalek*” is equal to 240. (As is well-known, in the system of *Gematria*, the word itself counts as one. Thus, *Amalek/240* is equal to *Iyar/239*, and therefore there is a parallel between these two concepts).

Whenever a person is sad, this really comes from the fact that he isn't connected to a root. He is like a branch disconnected from its root. The root has a ‘root’ as well to it: the lack of connection between the person and Hashem. By contrast, happiness is when there is connection to our Source.

It is written, “*With hardship shall you bear children*.”³ The pain of child labor is called “*etzev*,” which can also mean “sadness.” Birth is a separation of the baby from its mother; when the baby was in its mother, it is considered part of the mother. Now, it has disconnected from its mother – this is the “*etzev*”/sadness of giving birth.

Childbirth & the *etzev* which follows it, reflects the concept that a person has to be integrated with his Source. The purpose of man is to integrate himself with his root & keep connecting himself to his roots until he arrives at the root of all roots, the Creator.

On Yom Tov we have a *mitzvah* to be happy. Yom Tov is “*moed*,” which comes from the word “*vaad*” – a meeting. When there is a meeting, there is connection, and thus there is happiness.

THE MEANING BEHIND THE BONFIRES

There is a *minhag* on *Lag BaOmer* to light bonfires. We don't just light small fires like we light for Shabbos and Yom Tov. We light big fires – bonfires, which are called “*lehavah*” in Hebrew.

3 *Beraishis* 3:16

THE SPECIAL TIME OF LAG BAOMER

The inner meaning is to show us that we need to have a big “fire,” a *lehavah*, in our hearts, for Hashem. If a person has this inner fire, he is inwardly connected to *Lag BaOmer*. If a person is just lighting physical bonfires, but his soul is cold inside, he is not truly celebrating *Lag BaOmer*.

It is written, “*The house of Yaakov will be a fire, and the house of Yosef will be a big flame.*”⁴ This is referring to the inner layer of a Jew’s soul, the burning desire for Hashem. At first there is a small fire, and then it becomes a huge flame, a *lehavah*.

When a person increases his inner fire for Hashem until it is a big flame, then he can integrate with Hashem.

In other words, bonfires on this day are not just superficial acts of lighting big fires. They are meant to remind us of our innermost point of the soul, which is like a great, fiery desire to be connected with Hashem.

COUNTERING THE ‘SEPARATION’ CAUSED BY AMALEK

It is well-known that the evil force of “Amalek” causes disparity in Creation. Amalek attacked us in “*Refidim*,” and *Chazal* explain that “*Refidim*” is from the words “*rafu y’deihem b’Torah*” “their hands were weak in Torah,” implying a lack of

connection to the Torah. When a person’s hands become weak, he loses connection to what he is holding.

Our hands were weak then in “holding” the Torah - there was a weakening in our connection to Torah; and that enabled Amalek to attack us.

Of Torah it is written, “*Are My words not like fire, so says Hashem?*”⁵ The Torah is like a ‘fire’, and it gives the person the power to enlarge its fire. Then, on our own, we must turn it into a big flame - a “*lehavah*.” This is referring to the concept of becoming totally integrated with Hashem.⁶

The power that is inherent in the day of *Lag BaOmer* is essentially the power to become connected to the Creator – the opposite of Amalek’s agenda, who wants us to be separate from the Creator. This is also the inner meaning of what it means to “erase Amalek” from our midst, and thereby remove its evil. The “great flame” that can be reached on this day – integrating one’s self with Hashem – is what can prevent Amalek from coming to weaken us. Excerpt from the hebrew shiur *לג בעומר יומא דהילולא* 003 ■

5 *Yirmiyahu* 23:29

6 “*hiskalelus*” – *integrating with Hashem; see the end of “Bilvavi Mishkan Evneh” vol. I.*

4 *Ovadyah* 1: 18-21

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