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DEATH, LIMITATIONS, AND LIGHT OF THE INFINITE

MOSHE TURNED THE TIME OF DEATH\ CURSE INTO A BLESSING

In *Parshas V'Zos HaBerachah*, Moshe blesses the Jewish people before his death. Rashi says that "It is the way of *tzaddikim* to give blessings before their death." Normally, death is a curse, for Adam was cursed with death ever since the first sin. But for *tzaddikim,* the time of death can be a time to turn curse into blessings.

On a simple level, the time death represents curse and ruination, since death is delivered by the Angel of Death, who is synonymous with the Satan and the *yetzer hora* (the evil inclination).[1] However, on a deeper level, death can also be [experienced] on the level of the *tzaddikim*. The Gemara says that there were six *tzaddikim* whom the Angel of Death could not attack, and one of them was Moshe.[2] The time of death had come for Moshe, and Angel of Death arrived to fulfill its task, but it could not take Moshe's life. Thus, Moshe turned the time of his would-be death - a time that is normally the "curse" of death - into a time of blessing.

DEATH REPRESENTS LIMITATION

Let us reflect: What is the depth of this matter, of turning the curse of death, into blessing? Simply speaking, death is when a person's time comes to leave the world. But it is also deeper than this. The end of all people is death, there is an end to every created being, because only Hashem is Infinite and has no end, whereas the created beings are limited. Thus, death can be defined as the inevitable end of any created being.

Death manifests on two levels – on an external level, and on an internal level. External death is physical death as we know it. Death on an inner level is whenever something has reached its endpoint, or its limitation. There is a statement in the Sages, *"Hein, hein, gevuros olam*," "These are the limitations of the world", and this refers to the inevitable "death" and limitation of each created being.

Death exists on a repaired level, as well as on an impaired level. The impaired level of death is the curse of death that has been placed on mankind. The repaired level of death, which is the very holy root of death, is when anything has reached its limitation. These limitations are part of the design of Creation, thus they are holy. At its very root, death represents the holy idea of limitations. The limitation of any creation can be understood as its necessary "death".

REALIZING OUR GENERAL LIMITATION: WE ARE ALL FINITE BEINGS

To understand this better, let us apply the rule, "*Sof maaseh, b'machshavah techilah"*, "the end of actions is first in the thoughts"[3]. There is a beginning and end to all created beings (as well as a middle point). Whenever a person does any action, the action is always the end result of some will, thoughts, and emotions that preceded it. The "end" of all actions – which is the end of the end (since actions are the final execution of one's will, thoughts, and emotions) begins with thought. Therefore, in order to properly utilize the "end of all actions" – death - in the correct way, one needs to approach it with proper thought beforehand.

Firstly, one needs to use his thoughts to reflect and realize that one is a created being, who is limited, with an inevitable end. After one has thought about this and realized this fact, one should agree to this truth. It may be difficult for a person to agree to it, because people tend to think that they will be forever. Therefore, one should realize this inevitable fact,

1 *Bava Basra 16a*

2 *ibid 17a (The six tzaddikim were: Avraham, Yitzchok, Yaakov, Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. They left This World through a sublime form of death known as "misas neshikah", "death by the kiss of Hashem")*

3 *recited in Lecha Dodi prayer of Kaballas Shabbos*

that we are all limited beings with an end, and then one should firmly agree that this is indeed the truth.

Without absorbing this belief well, one doesn't realize that deep down, one views oneself as a godlike kind of being with no end and no human limitations. Though a person will not admit it openly, it is still deep in his subconscious. Deep down, a person doesn't want to admit to his limitations, and he thinks he is endless [unless he uproots this erroneous perspective from his beliefs]. That resembles "those who made themselves into gods"[4], because it is a small spark of heresy, when one thinks that he will live forever. It can be compared to a person who declares himself as an idol, who has convinced himself that he is an unlimited and infinite being.

This is the root behind the original sin of mankind, when the Serpent convinced Chavah (and later Adam) that they can become godlike beings, and become "similar to G-d." It was essentially a desire to escape all limitations. A created being will initial think of oneself as infinite (until he reflects about this and realizes that it isn't true), out of a desire in the soul to escape all limitations. When one has this belief, it conceals the "light of the Infinite" (the *ohr EinSof*).

As emphasized, this erroneous belief is deep in the subconscious, and one will need to challenge this kind of thinking and acquire the perspective that one is limited and finite, realizing that every person is just a created being, who is inevitably limited. As Chazal state, "It was to their agreement and their desire, that they were created"[5] [implying that every created being must come to agree with the fact that he\she is limited and finite].

REALIZING ONE'S PERSONAL LIMITATIONS

After one has acquired the above general perspective, there is another step, which is a deeper kind of awareness.

Since we are all limited beings, that means that we do not have actually have the ability to conceal the infiniteness (*EinSof*) of Hashem. The more one realizes this deep truth, the more one reveals the "light of Infinite" upon the soul. Therefore, if one doesn't merit the revelation of the Infinite upon his soul, it can usually be explained due to the fact that one hasn't yet traversed the first stage, of recognizing one's limitations as a human being.

In the step before this, we explained a general perspective towards death that one needs to acquire: to realize that all created beings are limited and finite. One should realize that only Hashem is infinite and unlimited. That is on a general level, and now we are explaining an additional step, which is on more individual level. One needs to see how one is personally limited. In practice, one should practice seeing the limitations of each thing in Creation, and then one needs to do inner work with oneself, by recognizing one's own personal limitations.

This second stage, recognizing one's personal limitations, can be divided into two parts.

Besides for being aware of the fact that all creations are limited and finite [which was the first stage of this awareness], one should also become aware that he\she has personal limitations that are unique to him or her, for every person has a unique soul root (*shoresh haneshamah*), which comes with its own set of limitations. The second part is for one to realize that, in addition to the personal shortcomings that are linked to the one's personal soul root, there are also personal limitations based on one's current spiritual level (*madreigah*).

The first part - recognizing the limitations of one's personal soul root – requires one to actually reach his\her soul root, the *shoresh haneshamah*. In the past, one was able to discover this knowledge from a prophet, or from attaining the level of prophecy. One is also able to know it if he\she attains *ruach hakodesh* [lit. the "holy spirit", an enlightened state that is on a lower level than prophecy]. However, this is a very high level of *avodah* which only a few individuals reach.

This second part - knowing one's personal limitations based on his\her

4 *Rashi Yechezkel 28:7*
5 *Rosh HaShanah 11a, Chullin 60a*

current *madreigah*\spiritual level – is much closer for most people to attain, than the aforementioned one.

In summary, one needs to first understand, recognize, and agree to the fact that all created beings are limited and finite, and that this includes him or her too, on a personal level. After that, one needs to recognize his\her own personal limitations, and this includes two different ways: knowing the limitations of his\her unique soul root (which is not that practical, since it can only be attained through *ruach hakodesh*, which few people reach today), and knowing one's personal limitations that are based on one's current spiritual level.

"RATZU V'SHOV" – THE CONSTANT MOVEMENT OF "ADVANCING AND RETREATING" IN CREATION

This leads us to the following point. In order for a person to tap into these concepts, one must know about the concept of "*ratzu v'shov*", "advancing and retreating", the ongoing cycle in the Creation in which all created beings are either advancing towards further spiritual growth and then retreating (whereupon the cycle repeats).

A person never stays at any one level. This is because all creations are constantly in movement.[6] The creations, by their very essence, are in movement. There is external and inner movement. When one simply moves from one place to another, this is external movement. There is also inner movement, which is described as "*shaashuim*".[7]

A mature adult person will go from one place to another, and this represents the idea of external movement. A child, however, will move around, but he will remain the same place. When you observe a child, you can see that a child will often move forward, then retreat to his place. The child will move around a lot, but he is essentially staying in the same place or room he is in. The movement of a child (*shaashuim*) who will keep retreating back to the same place even after moving, is the idea that represents the very root of all "inner movement": moving within the same place.

Taking this further, we can observe that even when one does move from one place to another, one foot is moving forward, while the other foot is moving backward. So even when a person is walking from one place to another, he is constantly advancing forward and retreating backward, within his very movement! That being the case, a human being never has actual movement from place to another, because even when he is moving forward, he has always 'left one foot behind' in his previous place, so even when he is moving, he is not actually moving completely forward. One's movements are always within the same place. This idea represents the ongoing process of "*ratzu v'shov*" in the Creation.

If one is meritorious enough, one merits to recognizes his\her unique soul root (*shoresh haneshamah*), but even if he or she doesn't merit to know his\her soul's 'root' (and, as mentioned before, most people do not discover it), one can still merit to get very far into his\her unique soul by at least becoming aware of the soul's 'branches'. This includes knowing one's various spiritual aspirations that one is striving for, and then becoming aware of the limitations of these aspirations. For example, one can become aware of certain levels he\she is trying to reach, and then one can become aware of the limitations involved in getting there. In this way, one is tapping into the ongoing movement of *ratzu v'shov*.

"Ratzu v'shov" consists of two points: the point you are advancing towards (*ratzu*) and the point you retreat back towards, which is your current level (*shov*). One needs to know the level he\she is trying to reach, which is not yet his\her current level and is currently an aspiration, and one also needs to know his\her current spiritual level, and this is how one becomes aware of his\her personal limitations, based on knowing his\her particular points of *ratzu v'shov*.

6 *As explained in "Getting To Know Yourself" (Da Es Atzmecha).*

7 *The term "shaashuim" is found in the verse in Yirmiyah 31:19: "Haben yakir li Efraim, im yeled shaashuim", "Is Efraim My favorite son or a delightful child?" Thus "shaashuim" means "delightful". Here the Rav is explaining the term "shaashuim" on a more inner level, as referring to a "childlike" kind of movement (as in the aforementioned verse, which describes a child), where the movements are staying within the same place, just as a child will move and still remain the same place.*

THE ALTERNATING PERIODS OF SPIRITUAL ASCENT AND DESCENT

The above concept is also explained in different terms: *gadlus mochin,* "expanded mind" [when one is currently rising higher in spiritual progress], and *katnus mochin*, "smallness of mind" [when one is currently on a down in spiritual progress].

Besides for knowing where one's personal point of *ratzu* is and where one's personal point of *shov* is, there is also a subtler level. There can be *ratzu v'shov* while being in a state of *gadlus mochin*: when one is in a more enlightened state, one is able to reach further levels, and his\her current spiritual level is higher than usual, because he\she is currently rising.

And there is also *ratzu v'shov* while being in a state of *katnus mochin*: when one is not that inspired to grow further spiritually, one is not able to reach as high as he\she would like to, and his\her current spiritual level is lower.

Every person has alternating periods (*tekufos*) in which there is either *gadlus mochin* (expanded mind) or *katnus mochin* (small-mindedness). Rabbeinu Tam in *Sefer HaYashar*[8] described this in terms of alternating periods of "*yemai ahavah*" (lit. "Periods of Love" – a period of spiritual growth) and periods of "*yemai sinah*" (lit. "Periods of Hate" – a period of a spiritual low). In either period, though, there can always be *ratzu v'shov.*

In summary, there are limitations of the Creation in general, and the limitations of each soul on an individual level. Within individual limitations, there are limitations based on one's personal soul root and current spiritual level (which include the limitations of his current aspirations, and his current spiritual state of either *gadlus mochin/y'mei ahavah* or *katnus mochin/y'mei sinah*.)

IN CONCLUSION

The more a person lives, with *siyata d'shmaya*, with the awareness of his general and personal limitations, one will be constantly tapping into the power of limitations, which is the holy and inner manifestation of the concept of death, which resembles the illustrious level of the death of *tzaddikim.*

Through the above, one becomes a true *kli* (vessel) that can grasp onto and hold the "*ohr Ein-Sof*", the light of the Infinite. As stated in the *sefarim hakedoshim*, "The light of the Infinite dwells within the creations."[9] It is how one can merit that which is described as "a spark of the Creator, within the created state."[10] This is a deeper dimension of how we can understand the blessing of Moshe to the Jewish people, at the time of his death.

On the one hand, *Parshas V'Zos HaBerachah* is the end, the "*sof*", of the Torah. But on the other hand, the word "*sof*" is from the word "*Yosef*", from the word "*tosefes*", "addition", a term which connotes the continuation of Heavenly blessing. The more that a person becomes a "container" by being aware of one's limitations, he utilizes the holy side to the power of "death" – which represents all the holy limitations that Hashem has created this world to remain in. To that degree, a person will merit that the *Shechinah* will dwell upon him, which is essentially the revelation of the light of the light of the Infinite within oneself.

This is the true realization of all Heavenly blessing: when one becomes a complete vessel to contain the Infinite Light of Hashem, otherwise known as the complete awareness of "*Ain Od Milvado*" – that there is nothing else other than Him.

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8 *Sefer HaYashar: 6*

9 Me'ohr V'Shemesh parshas Beraishis

10 Me'ohr V'Shemesh in parshas Lech Lecha; Sfas Emes in parshas Kedoshim: "There is a spark of the Creator in every Jew's soul." Sfas Emes in Parshas Yisro adds that a spark of the Creator is also contained in a gentile's soul, as well as in all creations, such as animals, plants, and non-living objects, but it remains concealed.