

**Between Religious Experience
and Religious Commitment**
Five Addresses on Youth in Crisis

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COMMITMENT VS. "CONNECTING" – THE CURRENT CRISIS OF OUR YOUTH¹

One of the cornerstones of Judaism is commitment. However, the very concept of commitment today faces a severe crisis among some of the Religious Zionist youth, in high schools and pre-military academies and, I imagine, also among some students at *hesder yeshivot*. (Although my remarks are directed primarily at the Israeli scene, I am sure that they are relevant in some measure to religious youth in the diaspora as well.) I am not going to address the issue of secularization which, to our sorrow, also exists in the high schools, but rather that of observant youth who have developed a new ideology. We are faced with a fascinating but frightening phenomenon, characterized by the term "*hitchabrut*," which signifies emotional identification, connection, sympathy or attachment.

Youth today seek "identification" with *mitzvot*, but not a "commitment" to them. Authority and obligation – two foundations without which it is difficult to imagine living in accordance with the Torah – have become irrelevant in these circles. Not only are these concepts not spoken about, but worse still – the very mention of these terms by someone else "turns off" these youth, since the "connection" they seek is personal, individual and experiential. I myself do not

¹ Translated by Kaeren Fish with Rav Reuven Ziegler. This speech was delivered at Yeshivat Har Etzion's *mesibat Chanuka*, 5760 (1999).

know the extent of this phenomenon, but it seems to be spreading.

A CRITIQUE OF CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOSITY

Before describing this phenomenon and its dangers, I shall say a few words about some of the positive elements that underlie it.

1) There is no doubt that this represents a search for *avodat Hashem* (service of God) that is meaningful and relevant in the here and now. The Torah teaches us, "And you shall seek out the Lord your God from there and you shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (*Devarim* 4:29). The path leading from the first stage of seeking to the stage of finding may be a long and difficult one, but the act of seeking certainly should be taken seriously.

2) This phenomenon also represents a reaction to the "herd mentality," the monochromatic approach, the banding together under the aegis of a few slogans and being satisfied with that – which, during recent years, have become the lot of the majority of Religious Zionist youth.

3) To my mind, there is also a reaction to the dryness and lack of spirituality that characterize the great majority of Religious Zionist synagogues. It began, I believe, with the establishment of synagogues for young couples a few decades ago. Young people did not feel at home in the existing synagogues, and this was justified to some extent. But instead of seeking

ways to integrate into the existing synagogues – admittedly a difficult task, for reasons which I shall not discuss here – they established *minyanim* meant exclusively for young people. These young people did not appreciate the influence of a prayer offered by an "elderly person who has children but whose house is empty" – the *mishna's* depiction (*Ta'anit* 2:2) of the most desirable prayer leader for a fast day. A heart-breaking sigh, the echo of silent weeping that one could encounter at times in older synagogues – these did not "speak" to the youth. The establishment of the new *minyanim* was intended to bring the youth closer to the synagogue, and indeed some positive actions were undertaken, but there was no success in infusing these places with "soul." The young people were brought closer to the synagogue, but not to prayer. Meanwhile the youth of then have become older, but most of the synagogues have remained as they were, devoid of vitality and spirituality.

4) The search for "connection" also contains a hidden criticism of the move towards nationalist ultra-Orthodoxy (*charedi-leumi*, or "*chardal*") that is currently the vogue and to which no small number of yeshiva graduates have been attracted. The criticism is aimed at the action-oriented nature of this ultra-Orthodoxy. From the point of view of strictness and precision in certain areas of Halakha, everything looks perfect, but the internal, spiritual sense of love and awe of God, which in general always accompanies precise observance of the details, is not apparent to the outsider. The discrepancy between the "duties of the heart" and the "duties of the limbs" is painfully obvious,

and this has led the youth of today to the logical conclusion – to their view – that this is not the way, and that new ways must be sought.

KEEPING TORAH OUT OF OBLIGATION, NOT JUST CHOICE

The factors that I have enumerated have served, I presume, as a catalyst for the new phenomenon to which we are witness. In truth, the roots of this phenomenon are to be found in the inner nature of religious life in the modern era, and I refer here mainly to the religiosity of Jews who are open to modernity and do not close themselves into ghettos.

According to our Sages, *Am Yisrael* accepted the Torah at Sinai out of two different motivations. The one was a freely-accepted and enthusiastic declaration of "We shall observe and we shall hear" (*Shemot* 24:7); the other was the coercive and threatening suspension of the Mt. Sinai like a cask over their heads (*Shabbat* 88a). It would seem that nothing could be more ideal than accepting the Torah out of free will and inner conviction – indeed, the Midrash narrates how, when Israel willingly declared, "We shall observe and we shall hear," the angels on high were astonished and asked, "Who revealed this secret to Israel?" At the same time, acceptance of the Torah that is based only on willing assent, without a basis of coercion, is deficient. The Maharal writes:

The reason for holding the mountain over them was so that Israel would not say, "We accepted the Torah of our own

free will, and had we not wished to, we would not have accepted the Torah." This would not have represented the glory of Torah... it is not proper that the acceptance of the Torah depend on the free choice of Israel, but rather that the Holy One obligate them and force them to accept it, for were it not for this [acceptance] it would be impossible for the world not to revert to its primordial chaos. (*Tiferet Yisrael*, chapter 32)

Lately I have the impression that these Jews, whom I am discussing, observe Torah and *mitzvot* not out of a sense of obligation and commitment but rather out of free choice, out of a recognition of the superiority of a Torah lifestyle over other lifestyles. The sense of obligation has weakened in recent years, if not disappeared altogether. We are faced with an acceptance of "the yoke of Heaven" out of a desire to accept the yoke, and not out of recognition that the yoke is forced upon us. I do not know when this phenomenon started, but in my public appearances both in Israel and overseas I began to address it more than ten years ago.

A significant fact should be emphasized here. What is involved is not an attitude of willing acceptance towards each individual *mitzva*, but rather a willing acceptance of the whole framework of religious life, undertaken with the clear recognition that the acceptance of a religious lifestyle is founded upon commitment towards Halakha. What we have here is acceptance of commitment to Halakha as part of the life

that a person chooses for himself, out of free will and not out of obligation.

LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

There can be no doubt that such an approach to Torah and *mitzvot* arises from the cultural atmosphere prevalent today in the world. The place of liberal individualism as a central foundation of modern culture and the place of the rights of the individual at the top of the hierarchy of values have led to a spirit of freedom from commitment. The very idea of obligation to any value or object is opposed to the idea of freedom. This being the case, any commitment – be it towards the nation, the state, society or the family – has no place in the era of individual freedom. Commitment contains an element of coercion; only action that is undertaken out of free will is desirable.

It is therefore no wonder that the modern religious individual is influenced by this atmosphere in his religious approach as well, and thus choice out of free will becomes the foundation of his religious worldview. Again it should be emphasized that within this approach there is a commitment to Halakha. Not only does such commitment exist, but it is in fact heavily emphasized, recognizing that this is the sole anchor preventing complete assimilation into the surrounding cultural environment.

EXPERIENCE WITHOUT COMMITMENT

Now let us address what is happening today among the youth whom I am discussing. The youth

have taken one further step – a step that is far-reaching and dangerous: they have removed from their lexicon the obligation to Halakha as well. Any obligation is invalid. The concept of authority arouses among them the suspicion that obligation lurks not far behind, and hence their opposition to the very idea of authority.

After removing authority from their lexicon, what remains? What remains is "identification," or "connection." Those parts of the Torah and those *mitzvot* with which the individual can identify and which sit well with his personality, those to which his "I" can attach itself experientially – these become part of his "I," and this represents the sole basis for his mitzva-observant lifestyle. This connection must be personal and individual, and obviously it can only be experiential. Religious experience is a personal matter; everyone experiences things differently. Connection based on reason and logic lacks the personal, individual element, since logic is something universal rather than personal, and so it fails to satisfy him.

It is in the nature of the demand for personal connection, devoid of any element of obligation, that a one-time connection at a conducive moment is insufficient; there must be a new connection established from time to time since there exists no accompanying obligation. Clearly, too, the connection that once existed at a conducive time does not create any obligation for other times that are less conducive.

SELECTIVE CONNECTION

The leap from this perception to that of "selective connection" is not all that great. Selective connection means that one is not satisfied with the idea of connection to a life of Torah in general; what is required is a specific identification with each individual mitzva. Then what happens is that one is able to "connect" to certain *mitzvot*, but with other *mitzvot*, one has less success.

These youth expect the Almighty to approach man and offer him *mitzvot* through which he will be able to attain religious elation and spiritual elevation; this style appeals to them. But to accept God as a commanding King who makes demands and is coercive – this is beyond their comprehension and is meaningless to them. The *Gemara (Rosh Ha-shana 28a)* teaches that, "The *mitzvot* were not given for our enjoyment." Rashi adds: "That is, in order for their observance to give pleasure; rather, they were given to be a yoke upon their necks." In the minds of these youth, this saying is meant for a different generation.

In summary, we are faced with a most grave phenomenon, even if it does bring the youth some enthusiasm in prayer, through song and dancing.

A RESPONSE TO ALIENATION

If my aim were to follow the example of R. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev and to find something to say in their favor, I would say that the search for "connection" arises from the sense of alienation that characterizes the

world today. Much is said about how modern communications have made our world into a global village. I believe that this represents a mistaken definition. The world has changed not into a global village, but rather into a global metropolis – a huge city with all the attendant problems of urbanization, which increase the feeling of estrangement among its inhabitants.

The automatization that has spread to every sphere of life has brought about a situation in which the connection between people and the reality surrounding them has become devoid of any human dimension. Everything is becoming "virtual," the virtual is the real thing, and reality has become, as it were, an imitation of the virtual. All of this increases the sense of alienation, especially among young people who have not yet become fully-fledged citizens of the world and are still trying to find their way in life. It is no wonder, therefore, that they seek the remedy for their estrangement in "connecting."

It is reasonable to assume that there are in fact different levels of the demand for "connection," and that the model I have presented is somewhat extreme. I have chosen intentionally to present this extreme model because I believe that any over-emphasis of the idea of "connection" contains the danger that it may lead to the model I have described.

LOYALTY AND FAITHFULNESS

I know that in order to address this phenomenon it is not sufficient merely to point out its dangers. We

need to deal head-on with the actual ideology of "connection." And in this regard I would like to clarify one particular point.

Words have their own dynamic. The concepts of "commitment" and "obligation" are relatively new, and they arouse associations of coercion, of something that is not part of ourselves but rather is forced upon us. In our traditional sources, the term that is used instead of "*mechuyavut*" (commitment) is "*ne'emanut*" (loyalty, trustworthiness, faithfulness). We say in our prayers, "You are faithful to revive the dead" – God is obligated, as it were, to revive the dead. Moreover, Rashi interprets the phrase, "I am Hashem" (*Shemot* 6:2), as meaning, "I am faithful to give reward." The Tetragrammaton refers to God's keeping faith with His creatures.

The concept of religious faith (*emuna*) is also an expression of loyalty (*ne'emanut*), as we pray, "...and [He] fulfills His faith to those who sleep in the dust." Faith, in the language of *Chazal*, means trust in God because He is the source of loyalty; it is not "belief that" but "belief in." "Since you did not believe in Me [to sanctify Me in the eyes of Israel]" (*Bamidbar* 20:12), God's criticism of Moshe when he struck the rock, means, "Since you did not have faith in Me, since you did not trust in Me." In *Mishlei* (20:6) we read, "Most men will proclaim each his own goodness, but who can find a man of faith?" The Maharal comments on this, "A man of faith is both someone who has faith in Me, and someone who is trustworthy in all his dealings and behavior." Faith, therefore, expresses two

things: faith in God, and loyalty in all one's behavior; in other words – obligation, commitment. In contrast with the strangeness of the word "obligation," "loyalty" expresses something that is close to man. It is a word that does not arouse any unpleasant associations; it is a word that expresses something of which man is proud.

The *Gemara* (*Ta'anit* 8a) recounts:

R. Ami said: The rains only fall for people of faith, as it is written, "Truth will sprout from the earth and righteousness looks on from the heavens" (*Tehillim* 85:12). And R. Ami also said: See how great are those of faith – from where? From a rat and a well. And if this is so concerning one who is faithful to a rat and a well, then how much more so concerning one who is faithful to the Holy One, Blessed be He.

What is referred to by "faithful to a rat and a well?" This refers to the loyalty towards a rat and a well, obligation towards them. The incident is explained in the *Arukh* (s.v. *Cheled*):

It once happened that a girl was walking towards her father's house, wearing silver and gold jewelry. She lost her way and wandered in uninhabited areas. By noon, she was thirsty but had nothing to drink. She saw a well with the rope of a bucket suspended over it. She took hold

of the rope and let herself descend into the well. After drinking she wished to ascend but was unable to, and she cried and shouted.

A man passed by and heard her voice. He stood by the well and looked into it, but he was unable to see her... He said to her, "What has happened to you?" She told him the whole story. He said to her, "If I lift you out, will you marry me?" She said, "Yes." He lifted her out, and wished to have relations with her immediately.

She said to him, "From which nation are you?" He said, "I am of Israel, from such-and-such a place, and I am a Kohen." She said to him, "I am from such-and-such a place, and from such-and-such family, well-known people of good repute." She said, "[A member of] a holy nation [of *Kohanim*] such as you, whom the Holy One has chosen and sanctified from amongst all of Israel – you wish to act like an animal, without a *ketuba* (marriage document) and without *kiddushin*? Come with me to my father and mother, and I will become engaged to you."

They each promised to the other. He said to her, "Who will be a witness between us?" A rat ran by them. She said to him,

"The heavens and this rat and this well will be witnesses that we shall not deceive each other." Each went his own way.

The girl stood by her commitment, and anyone else who proposed to her was refused. When they pressed her, she began to behave as if she was mad; she would tear her clothes and the clothes of anyone who touched her, until people began to avoid her, and she kept her promise to the man.

And he – since he was no longer in her presence, his evil inclination attacked him and he forgot. He went back to his city and returned to his occupation, he married another woman and she became pregnant and bore him a son.

At the age of three months, a rat strangled the child. The wife became pregnant again, and bore a son, and the child fell into a well.

The man's wife said to him, "If your sons had died in a normal way, I would have accepted the judgment. Since they have died such strange deaths, it cannot be for no reason. Tell me what happened."

He told her the whole story. She divorced him, telling him, "Go to the

portion that the Holy One has assigned to you."

He went and asked in her city. They told him, "She is mad. Anyone who wants her – such and such she does to him." He went to her father and told him the whole story, and said, "I accept any fault that she has." The father brought witnesses.

The man came to her and she started to act as was her custom. He told her the story of the rat and the well. She said to him, "I, too, have kept my promise."

They were immediately reconciled, and their children and possessions multiplied. Of her it is said, "My eyes are on the faithful of the earth" (*Tehillim* 101:6).

What do we learn from this story? The woman expresses fundamental human nature, without cunning or artificiality. The story shows that commitment – "loyalty," in *Chazal's* terms – is part of the essence of human nature, and deviation from it is a deviation from human nature, and therefore nature takes its revenge. Commitment is not something external; rather, it flows from human nature. If one removes from man his loyal nature – or, in other words, if one removes from him his sense of binding commitment and obligation – then one has removed the Divine image within him. Moreover, instead of the realization of God's promise, "And the

fear and terror of you will be upon all the creatures of the earth" (*Bereishit* 9:2), the rat and the well will overcome him.

A world that revolts against commitment is in fact revolting against its human nature, and I believe human nature will ultimately prevail, and this whole phenomenon – which is contrary to nature and contrary to humanity – will disappear in the not-too-distant future.

The *Gemara* (*Makkot* 24a) teaches,

613 commandments were given to Moshe... David came and summarized them in eleven... Yishayahu came and summarized them in six... Mikha came and summarized them in three... Chabbakuk came and summarized them in one, as it is written, 'And the righteous man will live by his faith.'

The reference here is not to faith in the sense by which we mean it today; rather, it refers to its previous meaning – loyalty to God. And so we read in *Chabbakuk* (2:3):

For there is still a vision for the appointed time, and it speaks concerning the end and it does not deceive; if it tarries, wait for it, for it shall surely come, it will not delay. Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright in him, but the righteous man will live by his faith.

The significance of these words is that the faith that "it shall surely come" is one aspect of faith; the other aspect is that the righteous man will live by virtue of his loyalty, of his commitment. "Chabbakuk came and summarized them into one" – the concept of faith, which is a two-sided coin: faith in God's loyalty towards man, and man's loyalty towards the Holy One – which we call commitment. Thus the concept of commitment becomes the basis for the entire Torah: "And the righteous man shall live by his faithfulness."

THE GENERATION THAT "DOES NOT KNOW HOW TO ASK"²

He called to Moshe, and God spoke with him from the Tent of Meeting, saying...
(*Vayikra* 1:1)

Rashi opens his commentary to *Sefer Vayikra* with the words of *Chazal* in *Torat Kohanim*: "All the speeches, instructions and commandments were preceded by a calling of affection." *Chazal* then continue,

Perhaps there was a calling as well for the breaks [between *parshiyot*]? The verse therefore teaches us, "and God spoke" – there was a calling for the speeches, but not for the breaks. What purpose did the breaks serve? To allow for some space in between one *parasha* and the next and between one topic and the next. How much more so [that breaks are necessary] for an ordinary person studying from an ordinary person!

It would seem that this line of reasoning – "how much more so for an ordinary person!" – applies not only to the need for breaks in between topics of study,

² Translated by David Silverberg and Rav Reuven Ziegler. This *sicha* was delivered in Yeshivat Har Etzion on *Shabbat Zakhor, parashat Vayikra* 5760 (2000).

but also to the affectionate calling to Moshe Rabbenu; this, too, must be introduced into our ordinary world. The Almighty found it necessary to begin each message to Moshe with a loving call – "Moshe, Moshe!" – thus imbuing him with a sense of elevation and of a personal connection to God. Certainly, then, when we ordinary people encounter these same commands, we too need a similar sense of spiritual elevation.

Apparently, *Chazal* (and Rashi, following their lead) intend here to convey to the following generations the importance of those emotions aroused by the affectionate calling. This accounts for the lengthy discussion in *Torat Kohanim*, which seeks to prove through detailed textual analysis that this calling preceded all commandments and speeches, and that it was indeed expressed at the burning bush, Mount Sinai and the *Ohel Moed*.

But we must recall the significance of these callings, together with the emotions and experiences they aroused. "There was a calling for the speeches but not for the breaks." The significance of the call and its accompanying religious experience lies in their facilitating the absorption of the commands. If these callings are not accompanied by speeches and commands, then those very same experiences and emotions will be viewed as an end unto themselves. The danger then exists that these feelings will serve as a substitute for the actual content of God's word and command.

The *gemara* (*Shabbat* 10a) refers to Torah as "*chayei olam*" – eternal life – and prayer as "*chayei sha'a*" – temporal life:

Rava saw that Rav Hamnuna was prolonging his prayer, and commented, "They leave aside eternal life and involve themselves in temporal life!"

Along the lines of this passage, Rav Kook *zt"l* wrote the following regarding the spiritual condition of the community in his time (*Kevatzim* 3:36):

When one's service is based upon the foundation of emotion and prayer, one must constantly be concerned about falling. For prayer is temporal life, and emotion changes with time. But when it is founded primarily upon the achievement of the intellect and the Torah, then the individual is more secure against falling. For Torah is eternal life, similar to a light that shines constantly. And although it is written, "Fortunate is a person who always fears" (*Mishlei* 28:14), nevertheless considerable guarantee and security may be found through the Torah.

Therefore, the weight of Torah must be decisive in one's service of God, in order to give the heart strength and security. But in any case, one should know that no person nowadays can realize any stature

if he does not also properly establish his emotions through prayer. In this way, he may rectify his concrete surroundings and will always be in between hope and fear, until a spirit from Above will arise in him and the power of God overcomes him, to the point that his fears have no impact upon him other than goodness and pleasantness, and no weakness or frailty.

Rav Kook here speaks of a concern for decline when one's service of God is founded upon intensifying emotion through prayer. "Emotion changes with time." Logic, by contrast, does not depend upon time or place; the supremacy of the intellect therefore remains in force at all times. It never changes and it does not depend upon fluctuating moods. Not so regarding emotion – even the most exalted emotion is good and significant at the moment it is felt, but one has no guarantee that it will arise again at other times and under different circumstances. Sometimes emotion develops into excitement accompanied by a sense of spirituality and elevation. But this excitement, which a person senses in full force, wears off with the passage of time, until new emotional stimulants are required. The person will once again need external energizers, which are not always available.

According to Rav Kook, then, the best advice is for one to base his service of God primarily on intellectual achievement in Torah study, while placing the appropriate emphasis on emotion and prayer. This

combination helps guarantee against regression from one's spiritual state. It is therefore proper to stress the ascendance of Torah-based intellectual reasoning in one's spiritual life. The Torah is eternal life, while prayer is but temporal life.

In relation to his own generation, Rav Kook adds, "But in any case, one should know that no person nowadays can realize any stature if he does not also properly establish his emotions through prayer."

Rav Kook speaks of "nowadays." For us, the "nowadays" of Rav Kook is already past history. One message we may draw from his words is that a person must always consider the "nowadays," in order that things do not become detached from the "here-and-now." Rav Kook asserts unqualifiedly that one cannot achieve any religious level without proper development of the emotions through prayer. This applies tenfold in our times, in light of all the changes that have occurred in the world in general and in the Jewish world in particular, seventy or eighty years after Rav Kook wrote these words.

The need for emphasizing the emotional basis of prayer, to the point of excitement and enthusiasm, expresses itself these days most clearly in the growing popularity of "Carlebach *minyanim*." Some remarks regarding this phenomenon are in order.

It is worthwhile first to quote the comments of Rav Yehuda Halevi (*Kuzari* 2:50):

Just as supplications require thought and concentration, so does joy in God's word and command require thought and concentration, in order that you rejoice in the mitzva itself out of love for He who commanded it. [Through thought and concentration,] you will recognize how much He has benefited you [through giving the *mitzvot*] – as if you came to His house, as one invited to His table to partake of His delicacies – and you will give praise for this with your mouth and heart. And if your ecstasy in *mitzvot* rises to the level of song and dance, then these, too, shall be the service of God, and through this, too, you will attach yourself to the divine concept.

The Rambam, at the end of *Hilkhot Lulav*, writes along similar lines:

Rejoicing in the performance of a mitzva and in one's love for the God Who commanded them constitutes a supreme act of divine service. Whoever refrains from participating in this rejoicing is deserving of punishment, as it says, "[You will be punished] on account of the fact that you did not serve *Hashem* your God with joy and a glad heart" (*Devarim* 28:47). Whoever inflates his ego and stands on his honor and becomes important in his own eyes in

these instances – is both a sinner and a fool. In this regard, Shlomo warned and said, "Do not glorify yourself in the presence of the King" (*Mishlei* 25:6). On the other hand, whoever humbles and makes light of himself on such occasions – he is an honorable, great person who serves out of love. David, king of Israel, similarly said, "And I will yet lower myself more than this, and will be lowly in my eyes" (*II Shemuel* 6:22). There is no greatness or honor other than rejoicing before God...

As opposed to this classical approach, Rav Nachman of Breslav, who sought to raise the level of the simple Jew's service of God, preached his whole life about strengthening one's joy through song and dance. This joy is not an **expression** of "*devekut*" (attachment to God), in the spirit of the classical approach, but rather a **means** through which one reaches "*devekut*." (I use the term "*devekut*" in its connotation among Chassidic and other circles.)

These two approaches bring to mind the comments of the *midrash* (*Midrash Tehillim* 24):

Any time it says, "*Mizmor le-David*," he would play [his instrument] and then the divine spirit overcame him. [When it says,] "*Le-David mizmor*," the divine spirit would first overcome him and then he would play.

Needless to say, we are very far from the music and divine spirit of King David. Nevertheless, under certain conditions, this *midrash* may serve as a source for those following Rav Nachman's approach.

If and when song and dance open a person's heart in prayer, deepen his sense of standing before the Almighty "Who listens to the prayer of every mouth," enable him to pour out heartfelt words from deep within, and as a result increase the joy in his heart, as it says, "My prayer shall be pleasant before Him; I will rejoice in God" (*Tehillim* 104:34) – if these emotions result from song and dance, then the words of *Chazal* regarding "*Mizmor le-David*" can indeed serve as a source for those who follow Rav Nachman's approach.

What's more, we should never look askance at the genuine ambition in and of itself, the sincere aspiration to approach God through joyous song and dance, even if the results are not realized. Just as the Almighty does not withhold reward for a pleasing prayer, so do we believe that He does not withhold reward for a pleasing aspiration. Without at least this "sincere aspiration," it is difficult to justify the style of these new *minyanim*, which deviates from the traditional order of prayer, even traditional Chassidic prayer.

Additionally, we must stand guard against those experiences of "*devekut*" and ecstasy deriving from Eastern religions, which pride themselves in the religious experiences they inspire. The standard-bearers of these experiences are indifferent to the many

social problems we face; they have no interest in mending the world, no ambition for justice and uprightness. Their entire world looks inward, focusing on their own religious experiences. These experiences are regarded as an end unto themselves, leading nowhere beyond.

In a powerful passage, Rav Kook writes (*Kevatzim*, 7:117),

The foreign, imaginary *devekut*, whose essence is in opposition to Torah and *mitzvot*, enlightenment, the way of the world, peace among people, and the development of society – this [pseudo-*devekut*] draws its strength from the impurity of idolatry... [even if] it seems to a person that he approaches the sacred, that he becomes enthused, that he tastes divine closeness.

We must therefore employ our intelligence to distinguish properly between experiences that derive from the sacred and those springing from alien sources.

It is worthwhile to mention Rav Kook's particular sensitivity to this problem. It may seem sometimes that he was overly sensitive. We read in that same section,

The separation that exists in the constitution of the soul and the inner state of the emotions between divine *devekut* [on the one hand] and Torah and

wisdom [on the other,] comes as a result of a decline, a result of some element of idolatry that darkens people's eyes and causes darkness in the world.

What is the secret behind the rejuvenation of Rav Nachman's approach and the phenomenon of these ecstatic *minyanim* specifically in recent years? There may be several possible answers. Certainly, one cannot view this phenomenon in isolation from the worldwide trend of abandoning reason in favor of various forms of mysticism – a religious, cultural and social issue that deserves independent treatment. However, I would like to raise one point related specifically to our community, which, to my mind, characterizes the current generation, particularly the youth. Despite my aversion towards generalizations, I permit myself the use of the term "generation" because we deal here with a remarkably prevalent phenomenon.

We have before us a generation that "does not know how to ask." Not just that it does not *know* how to ask, but it does not even *think* to ask, due to educational indoctrination. Not knowing to ask has evolved as an educational ideal throughout our school system. Those responsible for the education of the younger generation of the Religious Zionist community felt – both consciously and subconsciously – that developing an ideal of "not knowing to ask" served to guarantee the continuity of Torah and Zionism amongst the youth.

Youngsters, who naturally know how to ask, have learned to restrict their questions to limited contexts, where the questions lack significance and are mainly technical and formal, not existential. Regarding any areas outside these realms, the youth have internalized the educational message that questions are, if not outright forbidden, then at least inappropriate. As a result, a process has emerged whereby a sizable portion of the youth refuses to ask, not because they are afraid to ask, but because they do not know how.

It is accepted in halakhic deliberations in the *beit midrash* that the question-and-answer process does not end with the first answer. After the answer come possible refutations, which in turn trigger other answers, and so on. This process continues until the issue is clarified either with a decisive answer or with a conclusion that "*tzarikh iyyun*" – the matter requires further elucidation. However, this reasoning process is not employed, for example, in areas relating to Divine Providence in the post-Holocaust era, the rise of the State of Israel, its struggles and ongoing battles. I am not even going to mention our treatment of the Holocaust, for we have entirely pushed it out of our consciousness – but this is neither the time nor the place to deal with this issue.³ In these areas, when we attempt to allow even the slightest room for burning questions, a simplistic, slogan-type answer immediately shuts the door before any further discussion. There is no room even for a conclusion of "*tzarikh iyyun!*"

³ Ed. note: See Rav Amital's VBM *sicha* for *Asara Be-Tevet* 5760 – <http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/shoah60.html> .

There are other consequences to the inability to ask. We believe that our sacred Torah contains messages relevant in every generation. How can this be? Isn't the Torah eternal and forever unchanging, while the generations undergo constant change? This question was addressed by the *Chiddushei ha-Rim*, commenting on the verse, "Understand the years of each generation" (*Devarim* 32:7):

In every generation and in every period there comes from the heavens a new understanding of the Torah, one which is appropriate for the generation. The *tzaddikim* in each generation understand the Torah according to what is needed to teach the people of that generation.

Each generation has its *tzaddikim*, its teachers and rabbis. In order for these leaders to struggle and contemplate until they reveal the new understanding needed for their generation, they must be confronted with their generation's questions and problems, questions asked sincerely and genuinely. Only questions give rise to answers. If a generation does not know to ask, its *tzaddikim* will not know to respond. (I say this from my own personal perspective, and I assume that many will object. To my mind, however, the very discussion of this question is necessary and important.)

No one can deny that this educational approach showed signs of success in the beginning. Perhaps then it was possible to justify it. Recently, however, we detect widening cracks in this approach. But now I

would like to speak not of the cracks, and those who fall through them, but rather of the youth who toe the party line. Many youngsters have recently shown interest in the writings of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt"l*. One *rosh yeshiva* attributes this interest to the fact that these youth "are looking for legitimation to ask questions." Although this is certainly true, they are searching for something else as well: What does Judaism have to say to modern society? For better or worse, the Religious Zionist community today is open to everything going on in the world and expressed in the media – culturally, socially, scientifically, etc. Under such circumstances, it is highly doubtful if an educational ideal of "not knowing to ask" can survive very long.

Undoubtedly, the prophets already raised many questions to which there are no answers. There are other questions that are themselves simple, but the answers to which are complex and are therefore met with great difficulty by ears accustomed to simple slogans. But we must recognize the importance of the very possibility of questioning – and the courage to ask – even when the question remains without an answer. As the old aphorism goes, "A wise question is half an answer." Even the most difficult questions lend greater meaning to one's *avodat Hashem*, solidify his relationship to Torah and *mitzvot*, and afford greater depth to his service of God. By contrast, strangling the possibility of questioning leads to a general shallowness in one's service of God.

The danger of habitual and routine religiosity threatens every person and every generation. But in a generation that does not know to ask and thus lacks depth in *avodat Hashem*, the danger becomes all the more present. There is a particular danger that the inner element of *avodat Hashem* will be weakened to the point where the emphasis will shift exclusively to external actions; the "duties of the limbs" may completely overwhelm the "duties of the heart."

In such a generation, there is a real danger that the performance of *mitzvot* will become dry, lacking the "moisture" of spirituality, a sense of fervor and elevation. Relating to Yechezkel's prophecy of the dry bones, the *Gemara* comments (*Sanhedrin* 92b),

Rav Yirmiya Bar Abba said: This refers to people who do not contain the moisture of mitzva, as it says, "Dry bones – listen to the Word of God!" (*Yechezkel* 37:4).

As a result of this "dryness," there is a thirst for something spiritual, something exciting. From here evolves the growing popularity of "Carlebach *minyanim*," in which song and dance turn into the central foundation of prayer, with the expectation that these will provide a sense of elevation.

Rav Nachman sought to turn his teachings into prayers. Indeed, his student Rav Natan fulfilled this wish, turning dozens of his teachings into prayers. Now, however, the time has come to consider how to turn the prayers back into teachings.

THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF DIVINE SERVICE⁴

Last Chanuka I spoke about commitment vs. "connection." I would like to expand on what I said then.

The trend towards individualism has reached our *batei midrash* as well, and has become one of the distinguishing characteristics of Religious Zionist youth. Books deriving from the Peshischa school of *chassidut* (e.g. the Izbicer rebbe's *Mei Ha-Shiloach*), which deal with phenomena different from those that characterize our times and with people quite different from today's youth, have become popular. Recently I agreed to a request by the students of this yeshiva, who wanted me to teach classes on the writings of R. Tzadok Ha-kohen of Lublin. Tonight I would like to speak about one of the expressions of the search for "*hitchabrut*" (connection or identification) that I described a year ago.

There exists today a phenomenon of youth who wish to express their unique personality in their service of God. Moreover, these youth are searching for their personal religious identity. A number of years ago, youth were content with recognizing their **collective** religious identity – as part of such bodies as Bnei Akiva, the *yeshivot hesder* in general, a particular yeshiva, etc. Today, however, they seek their special

⁴ Translated by Kaeren Fish. This *sicha* was delivered at the yeshiva's *mesibat Chanuka*, 5761 [2000].

personal identity; they are no longer satisfied with an identity defined in collective terms.

The critical question is whether they are seeking their personal identity **within** the collective or without any connection to it. This fundamental question has serious ramifications. I assume – and hope – that our youth are searching for their personal identity within the collective and are not trying to abandon it.

A year ago I proposed that the emphasis be placed on **loyalty** (*ne'emanut*) rather than **obligation** (*mechuyavut*), since the latter is regarded by the youth as problematic. The emphasis on loyalty is of great significance. One of the reasons that youth today reject obligation is that the concept implies obligation to something that is external to myself, while I am seeking my own independent, personal identity. Loyalty, on the other hand, implies obligation to myself: I am loyal today to that which I chose yesterday.

The concept of loyalty ensures personal stability. A person who chooses to study at yeshiva, for example, must remain loyal to his choice, even if this loyalty entails obligation to the norms and the framework of the yeshiva. A search for personal identity without connection to any collective means a search for personal identity in a vacuum. Such a quest will most likely lead to disintegration of the personality, since there is no obligation or loyalty to anything at all.

The *rosh yeshiva* of a well-known institution for *ba'alei teshuva* once told me that the most popular book

in his yeshiva was the *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh*. The emptiness in the lives of these students before their turn to religion led to a sense of instability. Everything could fall apart; nothing was binding. That was why they eagerly grabbed a book that told them what they were **obligated** to do – only this gave them some sense of stability.

Since the founding of the yeshiva, I have spoken many times, with certain variations, about the following statement by the Vilna Gaon in his commentary on *Mishlei*:

...Each person has his own path to tread, for people's minds are not alike, nor are their faces alike, and no two individuals have the same nature. When there were prophets, people would go to the prophets "to inquire of the Lord," and the prophet would tell each person, through prophecy, the path he should take, each one according to the root of his soul and according to the nature of his body...

Since the time that prophecy disappeared, there is "*ruach ha-kodesh*" (Divine inspiration) in Israel, which advises each person how to behave...

But who can say, "I have cleansed my heart," that his spirit is free of deception altogether, and that his nature desires and tends towards nothing but the will of

the Holy One, as it is written in the *Zohar* on *parashat Va'era*? [The *Zohar* teaches] that someone who has no deception in his spirit truly cleaves to the traits of the Holy One, but if (heaven forbid) he behaves in accordance with his own spirit – for a person's ways are pure and righteous in his eyes – and his heart contains a tiny root that sprouts gall and wormwood, then his spirit contains deception, and he will fall from heaven to earth, so far that he will not be able to rise, and he will turn away from God's ways and His *mitzvot*, and will not know himself. (*Bi'ur Ha-Gra* on *Mishlei* 16:4)

I usually mention this in different contexts, such as in relation to the Rashi at the beginning of *Shemot* (1:1), emphasizing the importance of "name" as opposed to "number." Rashi writes,

Although God counted them (the descendants of Ya'akov) in their lifetime, He numbers them again after their death, to show His love for them, for they are compared to the stars which He takes out and brings back in by their number and by their names, as it is written, "...Who takes out their hosts by number; He calls each by its name" (*Tehillim* 147:4).

Although all stars look identical, we know that each star is a world on its own. The same applies to Israel:

each individual is a world of his own. I also mention this idea in relation to the concept that every Jew has a special letter in the Torah.

Since I have always emphasized the need for individuality in the service of God, when I am faced with the youth today who seek their unique personal identity in *avodat Hashem* I ask myself, "Is this the youth for which I prayed?"

My response is hesitant and full of reservations. In principle, I can certainly say that there is a positive direction here, which may be channeled. I am not speaking of channeling from above; definitely not. I am speaking of channeling that the youth themselves can do, and I pray that each one will indeed find his own special path and strive constantly upwards. But meanwhile I sometimes sense their impatience; and impatience that leads to short-cuts, to the wish to achieve quick results, the desire for immediate gratification – here and now and right away. I believe that there is a lack of awareness of the dangers, and it is about these dangers that I wish to speak.

Firstly, we are speaking today of youth who – to put it carefully – have a problem living with obligation, and prefer to speak of "*hitchabrut*," identification. By "identification" they mean personal, experiential identification. Hence there is a danger of seeing experience – even religious experience – as a central pillar of Judaism.

I am certainly not belittling the experiential basis in one's Divine service. I accept the comment of Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura on the *mishna* which teaches that "The reward for a mitzva is a mitzva" (*Avot* 4:2), explaining that a person's pleasure in fulfilling a mitzva is considered a mitzva in itself, and that he is rewarded both for the mitzva which he performs and for the pleasure he takes in performing it. Religious experience is enjoyable and heart-warming, but if the emphasis is placed only on the emotional experience, and we forget that "the *mitzvot* were not given for our enjoyment," then we are missing something fundamental. Rashi explains the aforementioned statement thus: "The *mitzvot* were not given for our pleasure, but as a yoke upon our necks." Although Rashi is speaking of physical pleasure rather than spiritual pleasure, nevertheless the sense of bearing the yoke of Heaven is one of the pillars of the Torah.

One may achieve an elevated level of spiritual experience through the acceptance of the Divine yoke, but that is a long and difficult path to follow. Likewise, that same wish for a "short-cut" may lead one to mysticism and wonder-workers – a phenomenon which has also spread in the Religious Zionist sector.

There is another danger to which the Vilna Gaon alludes: the quest for originality sometimes arises out of weakness, pride (the wish to be original), or laziness (a search for the "easy way"). The Gaon also hints at the danger that one's criterion for judging his personalized path will consist of nothing more than the experiential feeling of gratification.

Kabbala speaks of five levels of a person's soul: *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neshama*, *chaya* and *yechida*. The last, *yechida* (meaning singular), represents the deepest level, which is individuality, uniqueness. But an uncontrolled drive for individuality is problematic. First of all, *Chazal* commented on the verse, "and in order that the fear of Him be upon your faces" – "this refers to shame." A sense of shame is an important element in one's service of God, just as it has been an important element of human culture since the days of Adam and Chava. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai taught his disciples, "May it be His will that your fear of heaven be like your fear of flesh and blood." A sense of shame can exist only in a person who does not deride other individuals and does not denigrate the society around him. The quest for individuality can cause a young person to scorn everything around him: "I'll do what I want to; I don't care about anything."

Secondly, this tendency may also lead to a lack of social empathy. Thus, for example, eastern religions, whose influence is penetrating Israel as well, concede from the outset any hope of social improvement; values such as justice are outside their scope of interest. A lack of social concern is the complete opposite of the fundamentals of Judaism, which began with Avraham:

For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him that they should follow the way of God, to perform righteousness and justice. (*Bereishit* 18:19)

Man is "political by nature," in the words of the Rambam (*Moreh Nevukhim* 2:40) – in other words, man is a social being. Therefore, a religious experience that does not carry with it any social responsibility is disqualified by definition, and actually runs contrary to human nature. Someone who wishes to highlight his own personal path must invest the effort and seek the special path that suits both his unique personality and leads him to contribute to society, rather than just to himself. *Chassidim* speak a lot about "*devekut*," cleaving to God. *Chazal* taught (*Sifri, Ekev* 49) that the true meaning of cleaving is cleaving to God's **ways**, i.e. being merciful and performing kind deeds. In other words, a person must concern himself with the good of others and of society, just as God does.

I would also like to point out an ironic phenomenon to which we are witness: there are groups of *bnai Torah* whose members all share this tendency towards the personal. People in these groups seek out specifically the personal expressions in the writings of Rav Kook, and several collections of these sayings have already been published. These people talk, dress and behave alike, and have in fact become a sort of closed circle – they are identical in their appearance, behavior, song and dance. This is another danger that one must avoid.

In summary, I would like to say that the quest for personal expression and for a personal identity is a positive thing, but...

This "but" may be expressed in the words of the *Midrash* (*Yalkut Shimoni, Be-chukkotai, 670*):

"I pondered my ways and turned my legs back to Your testimonies" (*Tehillim* 119:59): King David said, Master of the Universe – every day I think and say, "I am going to such-and-such place, I am going to so-and-so's house," but my legs bring me to synagogues and *batei midrash*.

We may ask, did David really plan every day to go somewhere other than to a place of prayer or a place of learning? The Gerrer Rebbe, author of *Chiddushei ha-Rim*, explains that King David sought, according to the *midrash*, his own special path. This *midrash* is not meant to negate the aspiration to finding one's personal path, but rather to teach that the path must pass through the *beit midrash*.

"For every purpose I have seen an end; Your mitzva is very broad" (*Tehillim* 119:96) – the emotional, philosophical, and experiential dimension of every mitzva is immeasurably broad. Therefore, there is room for every individual to find his personal expression within the philosophical, emotional or experiential sphere of the *mitzvot*, without deviating the slightest bit in observance of *mitzvot*.

"THE NEARNESS OF GOD IS GOOD FOR ME"⁵

The *Midrash (Shemot Rabba 33:1)* relates:

There is a type of asset (*mekach*) whose owner is sold together with it. The Holy One said to Israel: I have given you My Torah; I Myself was given over with it, as it were, as it is written: "And they shall take (*ve-yikchu*) for Me a gift" [understood as, "They shall take Me as a gift"].

This may be compared to a king who had an only daughter. A king from elsewhere came and married her. He wanted to go back to his country and to take his wife with him. The [first] king said to him: "The daughter whom I have given you is my only one. I cannot part with her, nor can I tell you not to take her – after all, she is your wife. But do me this favor: wherever you may go, make me a little chamber that I may live close to you, for I am unable to be separated from my daughter."

Likewise, the Holy One says to Israel: "I have given you the Torah. I am unable to part from it, nor can I tell you not to take

⁵ Translated by Kaeren Fish. This *sicha* was delivered on *Shabbat Zakhor 5761* (2001).

it. But wherever you go, make Me a home in which I can live," as it is written, "Let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them" (*Shemot* 25:8).

Torah study strengthens the bond between man and God; this we learn from the above midrash. In conversations with young people who have difficulty understanding the value of technical halakhic study, such as "an ox that gored a cow," instead of studying spiritual matters, I usually cite this midrash. In this way I tell them that we have no rational explanation for this connection, but we remain faithful to the words of *Chazal*: "The Holy One said to Israel: I have given you My Torah; I have given Myself together with it, as it were."

Recently I have begun encountering a reaction to this that differs from the one to which I had become accustomed. This new reaction that stems from the spirit of *hitchabrut*, "identification" or "connection," that many of the youth have adopted. The essence of this reaction can be formulated as a question, or an expression of bewilderment: "If the Holy One really gave Himself over, as it were, together with the Torah, then why is it that when we learn *Gemara* we feel no sense of holiness, of something that is beyond mundane reality?"

Since this reaction has become prevalent, I shall attempt to elaborate on this matter.

The reaction may be interpreted in a positive or a negative fashion. Ultimately I tend to interpret it in a

positive light, but first I wish to speak a bit about the possibility of its negative interpretation. We detect here a note of skepticism as to the veracity of *Chazal's* description. It is not that they deny *Chazal's* notion, but rather they may believe that it is irrelevant for people like us. These young people say, "All that may be true when we speak of the Vilna Gaon's Torah study, but it is not true of our Torah study, of the Torah study of our generation, of our friends who are just now entering the *Beit Midrash*."

To my mind, this view is mistaken. I shall mention only the words of the Ba'al Shem Tov. The *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 88a) teaches:

"And they stood at the foot of the mountain" (*Shemot* 19:17) – Rav Avdimi bar Hama said: This teaches that the Holy One held the mountain over them like a cask, and said to them: If you accept the Torah – well and good; if you do not – here will be your burial place.

The famous question is: Why was there a need to threaten them with the mountain? After all, they had already declared, "We shall do and we shall hear!" The Ba'al Shem Tov answers: "This teaches that even when one is not feeling personally inspired by Torah and love of God, he is not free to desist from Torah study, and resembles one who is forced to engage in it, against his will." The Ba'al Shem Tov adds: "And this is a good path for a Jew for times of [spiritual] smallness."

In other words, at times when a person feels no

spiritual elevation, no enthusiasm, no inner motivation, it is good to know that the Torah remains the same Torah, and the Holy One is given over with it, as it were, in every manner of acquisition.

As I mentioned, the view of these young people is mistaken, but a mistake is not always to be judged as blameworthy. What is blameworthy is when a person thinks that the sole measure in matters of holiness is his own subjective feeling, i.e., whatever I do not feel does not exist. This is a very dangerous approach. It recalls the following midrash (*Tanchuma, Yitro 3*):

"And Amalek came and fought against Israel in Refidim" (*Shemot 17:8*)... How did they weaken them? It is written, "The name of the place was called Masa u-Meriva... saying, 'Is God among us or not?'" (*ibid. 7*).

Let me add something. I originally read the previous quote from the Ba'al Shem Tov in a sermon on *parashat Yitro* by Rav Norman Lamm of Yeshiva University, which he conveyed to me in the wake of several of my *sichot* that I sent him via one of our yeshiva's oldest alumni, who is friendly with him. The entire sermon is devoted to harsh criticism of those who say that Divine service – such as prayer and the performance of *mitzvot* – that is not inspired or elevated or enthusiastic, has no significance and contributes nothing to a person. From the style in which it was written I understood that such views, against which Rav Lamm so vehemently protested, were prevalent in the community to which he delivered his sermon. At first,

upon reading the sermon, I thought it had been delivered this year. However, I was shocked and relieved to learn that the sermon was given in New York in 1972 – i.e., about thirty years ago. I remembered the words of Kohelet (1:10): "There is a thing concerning which one says, 'See, this is new' – [but] it has been for all the ages that were before us."

I stated at the outset that the reaction I have been encountering recently could also be interpreted in a positive, praiseworthy manner, and that I am inclined in that direction. As I said, we are not speaking here of any doubt, heaven forbid, as to the truth of *Chazal's* teachings; it is unquestionably accepted that study of Torah, at all levels, strengthens the bond with the Holy One: "The Holy One said to Israel, I have given my Torah over to you; I was given over with it." And in the reaction – "But we want to *feel* it, too (in addition to *knowing* it intellectually)" – the emphasis is on the "too," not on the exclusivity of feeling. Subjective feeling certainly cannot be the measure of the true reality as to our bond with the Holy One. We are encountering in the questioning of these young people an innocent and beautiful wish, that is worthy of appreciation. This wish expresses real pain in the absence of that desired psychological feeling. The fact that this request comes specifically when the emphasis is placed on identification rather than obligation in no way disqualifies the wish itself. The demand to feel something admittedly pertains to *Gemara* study, but it points to a sense of something lacking in our Divine service.

The demand for even the slightest feeling of holiness, or at least of religiosity, is therefore authentic. It proves that something is lacking in one's religious, spiritual world. Each generation faces its own questions, trials and problems, and it is only natural to expect that each expects answers that address its specific needs.

The *Chiddushei ha-Rim* writes, on the verse "Understand the years of each generation" (*Devarim* 32:7):

In every generation and in every period there comes from the heavens a new understanding of the Torah, one which is appropriate for the generation. The *tzaddikim* in each generation understand the Torah according to what is needed to teach the people of that generation.

It seems that the "new understanding" suited to our generation has not yet been discovered, and therefore we encounter the demand for feeling, for experience, arising out of the sense that something is lacking. The demand is actually very modest, and the expectations likewise. All in all, the expectation is that in the wake of involvement in Torah study there will also be some kind of awakening of religious feeling, of a feeling that is difficult to define – a sort of "religious feeling that is the precursor of feelings of holiness," in the words of Rav Kook's early writings. In Yiddish it is called "*frumkeit*." There were trends in Chassidism and in the Mussar movement that opposed the development of this feeling, but it seems that when it comes to the

youth, all would agree that it is good and useful, and brings a person to fear of sin. The Ramchal, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzato, says that, "Fear of sin should exist at all times and at every hour, for at every moment one should fear lest he stumble" (*Mesillat Yesharim*, chapter 24). This contrasts with *yirat shamayim*, called "awe of God's loftiness" by Ramchal, which comes during Divine service or during prayer.

But we must know that this feeling is still not *yirat shamayim* and we dare not let it serve as an alternative to it. Something that is just emotion, with no foundation of intellectual profundity, cannot be *yirat shamayim*. Indeed, in the introduction to *Mesillat Yesharim*, Ramchal writes:

Scripture writes (*Iyov* 28:28), "Indeed ('*hen*'), fear of God is wisdom," and our Sages explain (*Shabbat* 31b): "'*Hen*' means 'one,' for in Greek, one is called *hen*." For fear (awe) is wisdom and it alone is wisdom, and certainly nothing can be called wisdom if it contains no intellectual depth.

The Ramchal distinguishes between fear of sin, which is "very easy to attain" and is worthy only of ignoramuses, and awe of God's loftiness, "which is less easy to attain, for it is born only of knowledge and the wisdom to meditate on the loftiness of God and on the lowliness of man. All of this is the result of the intellect, which understands and knows" (chapter 24). But as a prelude to fear of heaven, that emotion is certainly important and effective.

With all the importance of that emotion in our times, honesty demands that I say that for someone who seeks a guide in this area – I am not the right person for him. The *batei midrash* in which I grew up and was educated, my Rabbis of blessed memory from whom I learned Torah and fear of heaven – they had no need for this emotion, this "enthusiasm" and spiritual uplift. I am unworthy to guide youngsters who seek God and are thirsty for an emotion that I have difficulty defining.

I am full of admiration and appreciation of the student who wrote in one of our yeshiva's journals about his need to rise in the morning with a desire to become closer to God and to achieve an experience of closeness to Him. I am unable to use this style of speech. I have heard no small number of *sichot* on the verse, "And for me – the nearness of God is good for me" (*Tehillim* 73:28), but in the spirit of *Mesillat Yesharim* (chapter 1):

And upon further examination one sees that true completeness lies only in cleaving to God, and this is what King David said: "And as for me – the nearness of God is good for me" (*Tehillim* 73:28), and he also says, "One thing I ask of God, that is what I request: that I may dwell in the house of God all the days of my life, to see the pleasantness of God..." (*ibid.* 27:4). For only this is good, and everything else that people consider to be good is all vanity and worthless leading astray. And

for a person to achieve this good, it is necessary for him to toil first and exert himself in order to acquire it. In other words, he should attempt to cleave to God by virtue of deeds that lead to this, and they are the *mitzvot*.

I do not deny that there is also a possibility of closeness to God as an experience, but I find no hint of it in the words of the Ramchal. The Ramchal speaks of the obligation of exerting oneself to cleave to God through the performance of *mitzvot*. We should keep in mind that excessive emphasis on experience as a path to closeness to God can take a person to very distant quarters.

FROM COMMITMENT TO RESPONSIBILITY⁶

The *gemara* (*Tamid* 32a) recounts that Alexander the Great asked the Jewish Sages, "Who is wise?" They answered him, "One who foresees future trends." Foreseeing the future does not mean prophecy. A wise person is one who examines the present situation, analyzes it and draws conclusions with respect to what may possibly take place in the future. Regarding the verse, "Happy is the man who fears always" (*Mishlei* 28:14), Rashi (*Gittin* 55b) explains that such a person fears because he "takes care always to take into account future consequences, ensuring that his actions in the present will not cause problems in the future." This teaches us that we should attempt to understand what the future will hold. "Happy is the man who fears always," and there is no harm in attempting to emulate the wise.

Let us therefore analyze the changes that Western society is currently undergoing, and through them try to understand the trends and directions in Israeli society.

⁶ This *sicha* was delivered on Chanuka 5762 (2001). It was adapted by Yitzchak Barth and translated by Kaeren Fish. The adaptation was reviewed by Harav Amital.

THE RETURN OF "WE"

Modern Western society revolves around three central values, all of which relate to the individual: individual rights, individual liberty and individual privacy. It appears at times as though these have attained the status of absolute values, which may not be violated under any circumstances. Their effect on society and culture is discernible in almost every sphere: legislation, education, literature, art and the prevailing everyday lifestyle.

"Privacy of the individual" occupies a special place, for it is most comprehensive and the attitude towards it borders on worship. In light of this value, a number of rules have been established which leave their mark on all social relationships. For example, any conversation between two people who are not members of the same family or close friends must be pragmatic and to-the-point, free of anything personal. Any personal comment or question, or even a show of interest in the personal condition or feelings of one's partner in conversation is regarded as rude, a desecration of the holy value of privacy and a vulgar violation of his private life. Every person is a closed world, and no one else has the right to penetrate it. As a result, there is a growing sense of alienation in Western society in general, and in the United States in particular. There is "I" and there is "he," but there is almost never a "we."

The social analysis presented above was valid until September 11, 2001. With the collapse of the

Twin Towers, the barriers separating people also came crashing down. Obviously, the atmosphere of trauma and the invasive security checks that suddenly became part of the American routine contributed towards this feeling in no small way. But beyond this, the terrorist attacks seemed to bring about a fundamental change in the American way of life. Suddenly it became permissible once again to ask about the personal condition of other people, and the need to talk about one's feelings became obvious. I cannot say how long this atmosphere – the lack of alienation – that has prevailed in New York since September 11th will last, but what is clear is that the concept of individual privacy will not be held on as high a pedestal as it was previously. Having seen that this value cannot stand up to a crisis, the Americans will not continue to regard it as holy.

This development may influence the structure of Western society even more forcefully. While the emphasis was on individual privacy and alienation dominated human relations, society was witness to some inordinately individualistic phenomena. When a person is fiercely guarding his privacy, his relationships revolve around himself and he feels no responsibility for the fate of the people and the environment around him. After September 11th, when the walls of alienation between people collapsed, this exaggerated individualism may have started to recede.

In addition to the change that has taken place in the perception of the value of privacy, the collapse of the Twin Towers also dealt a mortal blow to post-

modernism. The quotation marks that post-modernism had placed around words like "evil" and "good" were suddenly removed, and good and evil again became absolute values. The hand of Divine Providence may be discerned in the fact that the man holding the Presidency of the United States possesses basic human intuition, and makes repeated use of absolute moral concepts, calling Bin-Laden and other terrorists "evil." Perhaps if the President of the world's single superpower were a Democrat instead of a Republican, he would be using completely different terminology – "enemy" instead of "evil" – thereby leaving open the possibility of thinking that there is no absolute good or evil. This development may also help to weaken the trend towards individualism: when there are no absolute values and everyone is free to mold his values in accordance with his own world-view, then individualism reigns supreme. But when values become absolute, then they are of necessity common to most people, and the individual feels part of a greater society that shares his values.

A similar change to the one brought about in the United States by the collapse of the Twin Towers has taken place in Israel in the wake of the present intifada. Obviously, what we have experienced is not a grandiose one-time event that brought about immediate results. Nevertheless, the intifada seems, slowly but surely, to be eating away at the individualism prevalent in our society. With the tragic multiplicity of terror attacks and their victims, and the recognition that nowhere is "safe," the principle of the collective "we" is strengthened at the expense of the individualistic "I."

IDENTIFICATION VS. RESPONSIBILITY

For the last two years I have spoken at the yeshiva's Chanuka banquet about how today's youth are tired of hearing about "obligation." In my opinion, however, there has been a turnaround in the attitudes of Israeli youth during the past year, in the wake of the security situation and the economic recession. The escape into personal, individual "identification" does not sit well with the atmosphere of crisis in the country, which emphasizes togetherness.

Indeed, the renewed sense of togetherness is a very positive development. The *gemara* discusses the importance of participation in communal distress:

Our Sages taught: When Israel is in distress and one person separates himself, then the two ministering angels that accompany the person, as it were, place their hands upon his head and declare, "Let So-and-so here who has separated himself from the community not witness the future comforting of the community."

Another *baraita* teaches: When the community is in distress, a person should not say, "I am going to my house to eat and drink, and peace be upon my soul..." Rather, he should feel sorrow together with the community. So we find in the case of Moshe *Rabbeinu*, who

identified with the suffering of the nation, as it is written, "And the arms of Moshe grew heavy, and they took a rock and placed it under him, and he sat upon it." Did Moshe not have a cushion upon which to sit? [He surely did,] but this is what he said: "Since Israel is suffering, so I will be with them in suffering." And whoever shares in the suffering of the community will merit to see the consolation of the community. (*Ta'anit* 11a)

In light of recent events, and in light of the reluctance of the youth to identify with "obligation," we need to raise the banner of "responsibility." To a certain extent, responsibility is even more binding than obligation. On the other hand, it is a gentler concept that also gives one a sense of satisfaction: if a certain responsibility is placed upon someone, it means that he is worthy of it. People tend to identify with the tasks allotted to them, and when they fulfill their tasks properly, they experience satisfaction from their success.

Responsibility is required in many different spheres: responsibility for the psychological and spiritual strength and immunity of the public, responsibility towards people who need help, and responsibility to seek and find ways in which to contribute. In the words of the Sages, being responsible means being a guarantor: "All of Israel are guarantors for one another." This means that *Am Yisrael* is a

living, human entity, in which every limb is concerned for the welfare of every other and is responsible to do its utmost to improve the other's situation. A sense of responsibility towards others means that a person doesn't look about for a cushion to sit on while his companions are suffering. Moshe *Rabbeinu* sat upon a rock because he felt himself a partner in the suffering of his brethren. Likewise, we are required to feel a sense of partnership and to assume the responsibility of doing what we can to improve society as a whole.

Concerning a person who restricts the sphere of his concern to his own personal well-being – even if he is concentrating on his spiritual well-being – the *gemara* in *Avoda Zara* teaches that he is compared to someone who has no God. It is interesting to review the context and to note the broad scope of this statement:

Our Sages taught: When Rabbi Elazar ben Parta and Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon were caught [by the Romans], R. Elazar ben Parta said to Rabbi Chanina ben Teradyon: "Happy are you, for you were caught for only one transgression; woe is me, for I have been caught for five."

R. Chanina answered him: "Happy are you, for you have been caught on five counts and you will be saved; woe is me, for I have been caught on one count, and I will not be saved. For you engaged in Torah as well as acts of kindness, while I

have involved myself only with Torah. And, as Rav Huna taught, a person who engages only in Torah is compared to one who has no God..."

Did R. Chanina then not engage in acts of kindness at all? We learn that Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov said: "A person should not give money to a charitable cause unless it operates under the auspices of a Torah scholar like R. Chanina ben Teradyon," [thus proving that he engaged in charity!] ... Rather, R. Chanina engaged in acts of kindness, but not as much as he should have. (*Avoda Zara* 17b)

R. Chanina ben Teradyon died in the sanctification of God's Name when the Romans wrapped him in a Torah scroll and burned him to death. Yet he justified his fate on the basis of not having engaged in acts of kindness to the extent that he should have, devoting himself mainly to Torah study instead. He had not found the proper balance between his devotion to Torah and his social concern, and for this reason he judged himself to be as "one who has no God." We must learn from this that we are obligated to engage in *gemilut chasadim* alongside our Torah study.

In these difficult times, we must emphasize the responsibility that is placed upon each of us. Obviously, in accepting responsibility, each person can express his own individuality; but every single person has an obligation to feel a partnership, to take

responsibility, to assist, and – with God’s help – to fulfill his role in mending society as a whole.

During Chanuka, we thank God at length for the miracles that He performed for us. It seems that our great praise of and appreciation for Divine intervention has dulled our consciousness of the merit of the *Chashmonaim* for the miracle that they helped bring about. Their readiness to raise the banner of revolt and to go out as a small band against a great and mighty army, to forge against the stream – this was the miracle that the *Chashmonaim* wrought, of their own free choice. When we speak of the miracles that God performs for us in our days, we must educate also towards the performance of miracles in the spirit of the *Chashmonaim*: to strengthen our resolve to act out of a sense of responsibility for the fate of the nation as a whole, in the hope that God will be with us and help us in all our endeavors.



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