

A PURIM READER

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YESHIVA

OF GREATER WASHINGTON

The Other Angel

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“We will sanctify Your name in the world as [the malachim (angels)] sanctify it in the high heavens...” We make this declaration daily in the kedusha prayer, committing ourselves to sanctifying the name of Hashem as the malachim do on high. The significance of this commitment is perplexing. Malachim are extremely different than humans. They are not physical, have no free choice, and no challenges in their service of Hashem. Seemingly, the method through which malachim praise Hashem is irrelevant to our daily lives. We should have our own unique way of praising Hashem, based on our reality, our challenges, and our freedom to choose right from wrong. If so, why should we attempt daily to emulate the way in which the malachim sanctify Hashem?

The Arizal famously compares Purim to Yom Kippur. This comparison at first seems to be laughable. It’s hard to find two days on the Jewish calendar that are more opposite than Purim and Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is the sacred, solemn day of fasting, prayer, confession, and repentance. Purim is a wild, joyous day, filled with food, dancing, and celebration. In what way do these two holy days connect?

To attain an understanding of the above issues, we need to explore another daily tefillah. There is a Torah obligation to recite Shema twice daily, once in the morning and once in the evening. Our recitation begins with two lines: Shema¹ and Baruch Shem². The Torah itself does not contain the line of Baruch Shem. Nonetheless, it is added into our recitation of the Shema³. What is the meaning of these two lines and why is Baruch Shem necessary?

Shema and Baruch Shem represent two sides of the same coin. Both are proclaiming the unity of Hashem in our world. Shema recognizes Hashem as One, the One and Only force in this world. Baruch Shem perceives the Unity of Hashem through the glory of His kingdom, as will be explained. The Zohar refers to this as the difference between the *yichuda illaah*, the upper unity, and *yichuda*

¹ “Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echod” – Hear Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One

² “Baruch shem kvod malchuso lolam voed” – May the name of His glorious kingdom be blessed for all eternity

³ Pesachim 56a

tasaah, the lower unity. Although this is obviously a very profound concept, it can be understood even on a basic level. An analogy can be used to best illustrate these ideas. A typical jigsaw puzzle consists of two elements: the box and the pieces within. The box typically displays the full picture as one. The cut pieces are not visible on the box itself, rather one unified image appears. However, inside the box the picture is broken into hundreds or thousands of pieces. Dumped haphazardly onto the table, the pieces appear messy and chaotic, presenting a daunting challenge to the person assembling the puzzle. If the pieces are put in the wrong order, they don't fit correctly and the desired picture cannot be formed. However, if each piece is placed appropriately into the puzzle, eventually the numerous pieces will perfectly form the initial picture seen upon the box.

Our world is like a puzzle. From one perspective, the entire world is purely Hashem. Nothing exists, nothing functions, all is null and void vis-à-vis Hashem and His Will. This is the ultimate perspective from the "upper view", the view of pure truth, when all is clearly seen as subjugated to and wholly dependent upon Hashem. Every element of this world is merely a cog in Hashem's big machine. This is our attitude when we say the first line of Shema. We cover our eyes, signifying our non-existence and powerlessness in relation to Hashem. We declare Hashem as One, not only proclaiming the absence of other gods, but proclaiming that this world is one unified system, under His total mastery. There is nothing else besides Hashem and His plan. Every piece of our lives and of history are all under His control, and fit into His goals for the world. "*Ein od milvado*," there is **nothing** other than Him⁴.

However, we then step back and view our lives from the "lower view." We see ourselves as individuals. We perceive an existence independent from G-d. We exercise free choice. We experience our own personal pleasure and pain, are presented with challenges and struggles, and see events that appear to be happenstance and chaotic. At that point, as Jews, it is our duty to say "Baruch Shem," and proclaim that all of this is the glorious kingdom of Hashem. We commit to doing our best to place the haphazard puzzle pieces into their proper position and believe sincerely that they all do somehow fit into the big puzzle. We know that one day we will see how they all really do from the intended picture on

⁴ Devarim 4:35

the great "puzzle box" depicted at the time of creation. "And Hashem will be king over the land. On that day Hashem will be one and His name will be one."⁵

Baruch shem is the task of unifying Hashem from within our daily life, with the ups, downs, and challenges inherent in an existence of free choice. We know that our every dimension of life, whether good or "evil" in some way will fit in to the great jigsaw puzzle of history. It is Hashem's kingdom, and all of the subjects are under his control and will succeed in expressing the King's desires.

Shema and Baruch Shem both point towards one concept, the unity of G-d. However, Shema depicts this from the "upper" perspective, which is fully cognizant of the unity of Hashem and powerlessness of all else. Baruch Shem portrays the unity of G-d from the lower perspective. It adjures us to take all of the chaotic pieces of our lives and to utilize our power, individuality, and free choice, to see how they really all are necessary pieces in Hashem's united and glorious kingdom⁶!

Accordingly, the Jewish year contains two days that give us a glimpse into these two concepts of Shema and Baruch Shem. Yom Kippur is the day of Shema Yisroel on the calendar; the day on which we participate in the "upper unity", the glimpse from above. On Yom Kippur, we abstain from our world, devote ourselves to prayer and repentance and rise above the boundaries of physical life. We attempt to resemble angels through our actions, dress, and focus⁷. The day is spent primarily in Shul, relating one-on-one to G-d through prayer and contemplation. On Yom Kippur, our sins are forgiven, for in this higher world, sin has no place. All is null and void in relation to Hashem. Our being is insignificant totally enveloped in Hashem's all-encompassing existence. After Yom Kippur, we descend back to our world once again, but cleansed of our sins, purified, and inspired by a day of total submission to our Creator and denial of our independent needs. On Yom Kippur, we live the words of Shema Yisroel.

But our daily lives do not resemble Yom Kippur. We have physical needs, challenges, and independent desires. When it's not Yom Kippur, we live in the realm of putting all of the pieces together in the spirit of Baruch Shem. The

⁵ Zechariah 14:9

⁶ See Nefesh Hachaim, Section 3, Chapter 6

⁷ Not partaking in physical pleasures, wearing white, standing, and other laws and minhagim all suggest this idea.

pinnacle of Baruch Shem is on Purim. Purim is a day that is totally of our world. Eating, dancing, gifts, and celebrating are the staples of day. Even with the Megillah reading, davening is relatively quick, and the day is spent out of the shul, with friends, family, and community. But yet our task on Purim is to see how all our mundane, physical world is part of the unity of Hashem.

The Purim story illustrates this concept clearly. The miracle of “v’nahaphoch hu⁸” revealed to us that all that seems evil and tragic is truly a blessing and to our benefit. Events in this world are not as they seem. Haman’s plan was not only thwarted, but served to benefit the Jews. His planned genocide became our joyous festival. His wealth became our wealth. His power fell into Mordechai’s hands. His goal to stomp out the Jewish people resulted in a renewed national commitment to the Torah and an influx of converts. There is no greater example of the unity of Hashem in our world as is the understanding that what we perceive as evil is in truth Hashem’s hand showing love and care for the benefit of the Jewish people⁹. Nothing is happenstance, no events are random, and evil is an illusion. It’s all good. Everything is part of Hashem’s benevolent plan for history. We see that even in exile, in a land of hedonism and idolatry, under the threat of genocide, the unity of Hashem is apparent.

On Purim, we take this message and extend it to our lives. We experience the notion that physical needs, though seemingly profane, are not counter to our spiritual goals, but part and parcel of serving Hashem. Friendships with others are not just emotional bonds but further Hashem’s unity in our world. A joyous seudah full of eating drinking, dancing, and fun becomes a totally spiritual experience. It’s all one. These elements of life are not in opposition to our relationship with G-d, but a primary part of that relationship! We see how each piece of the jigsaw puzzle, which was first seen scattered on the floor and had stumped us as to its function, fits right in and forms the full intended picture on the box¹⁰.

⁸ Esther 9:1

⁹ When the enemies entered into the Beis Hamikdash, they saw the Keruvim embracing (Yoma 54b), indicating a moment of love between Hashem and the Jewish people. Even a time of destruction was an expression of Hashem’s love.

¹⁰ This gives us an understanding of why we refer to the holiday as Purim, lotteries. A lottery seems haphazard and random, as do many things in our lives. Purim shows us that even that which seems random is purposeful and part of the Divine plan of the world.

The partnership formed between Yom Kippur and Purim, expressed through the pairing of Shema and Baruch Shem represent the great role of a human being. The gemara¹¹ relates that a human being is like a malach in three ways and like an animal in three ways. In other words, a person can be viewed as part angel and part animal¹². What does this mean for us in a practical sense? Hashem has many malachim that do his bidding. Malachim are beings that have no free will rather they just do as they are told. Through their obedience and accomplishment they praise and exalt Hashem. However, Hashem desired that there exist a different type of being with free will, which must endure trials and tribulation. Nonetheless, despite its tumultuous and challenging existence this being must remain obedient, accomplish its mission, and praise Hashem. This is the primary role of a Jew in this world. We, from within the physical world, with our animalistic tendencies, are supposed to step into the shoes of a malach and glorify Hashem. Along with Gavriel, Michael, Refael, and Uriel, there is another great angel: Yisroel¹³. Our task is to become angels and praise Hashem along with our heavenly counterparts, but not from the heavens¹⁴.

On Yom Kippur, we stress our “malach side” and rise to truly angelic heights. Avoiding physical pleasure and wearing white, we elevate ourselves and intimately connect with our Creator. On Yom Kippur we serve Hashem from the “upper” view, using our higher elements. On Purim, our job is to perform our task of exalting G-d from totally within our world, with our “animal side” but yet with the sanctity, intent, and focus on G-d as angels do up above. Purim is the day when we can truly hit the pinnacle of our job in this world, to be totally focused on Hashem’s praise and unity, but from within our “lower” existence. This is the incredible power of Purim. We have an opportunity to fulfill our role as Yisroel Hamalach with *his unique task*. We unite, celebrate, eat, drink, sing, and dance all for the sake of Hashem. Like Yom Kippur, Purim is also a day during which we should be totally enveloped in the unity of Hashem.

¹¹ Chagiga 16a

¹² Also evident in the synthesis of body and soul that forms a human being. See Bereishis 2:7

¹³ Note how the names of malachim always begin with a certain middah or role and conclude with a name of G-d, E-l. Yisro-el follows in suit.

¹⁴ Interestingly, it seems that Hashem prefers our praise to the praise of the angels. See the piyutim on Yom Kippur prior to Kedusha of Shacharis and Mussaf that describe that despite the holiness and perfection of angels, Hashem desires praise from the Jewish people. Furthermore, Chazal tell us that the malachim do not begin their praises until we begin our Kedusha here on Earth (Chulin 91b).

Now we can understand the significance of the Kedusha text. “We will sanctify Your name in the world as [the malachim] sanctify it in the high heavens...” When reciting Kedusha, we are not mimicking the malachim, but doing our job as malachim stationed within the world. Kedusha is our daily time to sing shira just as malachim do on high. This Purim, may we embrace our role as Jews and devote ourselves to sanctifying and unifying Hashem from our earthly existence!

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