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Shoftim

Elul. Once upon a time, it was a word that inspired people, made people “shake in their books.” It meant judgment day was coming, and that got a lot of Jews nervous. I too shake in my boots when I hear “Elul,” but mostly because I anticipate spending many tiring hours in shul and eating too much food. I must have lost something in the translation.

The ironic thing is, those earlier generations probably had less to worry about than we do. Their level of commitment to Torah and *mitzvos* was probably far less casual than ours is today, and they probably had fewer vices. Clearly their *yiras Shamayim*, fear of God, was greater, which meant God was more real to them than He is to us.

What does that even *mean*? How can God be more real or less real to someone? You either believe He exists and that He is real to you, or you don't, and He is not. How can there be levels of being real?

The answer has to do with how emotions can be out of synch with intellect. There are many things we “know” to be true, and yet we still treat them as if they're not. Health is a good example of that, because despite the fact that we have been told, and believe, that certain eating habits are bad for health, we do them anyhow. Even though we know that certain foods, especially in large quantities, are dangerous for our health, we consume them anyhow.

I once had an hour-long talk with someone who did not believe in God. After I made the case for God's existence and the hour was over, the person got up and said to me, “Everything you said made sense, but I'm leaving anyhow.” And so he did, and after he left I wasn't sure if he was just being polite, because I could not understand how he could believe that and then ignore it.

The truth is, we all do the same thing on some level and some of the time. The

Torah opens up with the need to appoint judges and police people to keep the peace because there were going to be people who were going to disrupt it. . . people who knew God is real, Torah is obligatory, and punishment follows for disobedience. That's the problem with not syncing your emotions with your intellect.

This is why the Mussar Movement sprang up in the 1800s. It was an attempt to help synch the hearts and minds of those willing to embrace it, so that God would be more real to them. It focused on ideas and rules in such a way as to drive them home, to have the mind share these ideas and rules with the heart. Where the heart goes, the person goes, making it the battleground of life.

Incidentally, they once asked the Brisker Rav if he learned mussar. He said yes, every time he learned Gemora. In other words, he didn't necessarily learn *sifrei Mussar* like others in the movement because he didn't have to. Whatever mussar he needed to learn, he was able to extract from his learning, no matter how technical it was. That was how the Brisker Rav learned.

Anyone familiar with the learning approach of Brisk knows that it is extremely sensitive to details and nuances. Sometimes, to an outsider, it can seem like too much, and some of their conclusions can seem like over the top. For example, to avoid any doubts requiring the baking of *matzah*, they burn it. This way, there is no possibility of any *chametz* remaining after the baking process.

Though not everyone relates to the Brisker approach or their way of thinking, it doesn't prevent them from seeing and appreciating their genius. They command a lot of respect in the Torah world, and have provided incredible Torah insights over the generations.

It is said that "God is in the details." What people tend to mean is that attention to detail is crucial for achieving God-like success or perfection. It emphasizes that any action or plan should be executed carefully, as small details can significantly impact the overall outcome.

But the statement is true literally. One of the most efficient ways to connect up heart and mind when it comes to Torah ideas is to stop looking at them superficially. Ideas can be incredibly deceiving, and words can be very distracting. More importantly, the brain can think it's seen all it needs to see to make an accurate assumption about life or a situation when, in fact, it hasn't. So many mistakes, including many of the more tragic ones, are because people didn't think about something long enough.

The Sforno says this is the reason why we made *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the "image" of *Elokim*. *Elokim* is the Name of God that denotes discernment, which means that we have been endowed with this ability as well. All that goes wrong in history, and is

going wrong now, is that people don't use this ability enough, and have such faulty approaches to life.

So, in a sense, this is what we're being judged for, how well we used our brains the previous year. And we take the time to do that now, especially as we continue into Elul Zman, then maybe we'll be able to shake in our boots for the right reason, and soften our judgment on Rosh Hashanah, may it come upon us for good.

Have a great Shabbos,

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