



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

THURSDAY, MAY 31ST 2018 – 17TH SIVAN 5778

PARSHAS BEHAALOS'CHA

SERMON TITLE:

Getting Into Jewish Circles

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Behaalos'cha
Getting Into Jewish Circles

Good Shabbos!

Have you heard about Choni? - Choni HaMaagal, the holy Talmudic sage who lived at the end of the Second Temple era over 2,000 years ago.

At the time Choni HaMaagal lived (and to this day), the Holy Land had a problem with water. So at one point there was a drought, and Choni was asked to pray for rain on behalf of the people. But at first, his prayers were not answered; it did not rain.

So the Talmud tells us: “[Choni] drew a circle [on the ground] and stood inside it as had Chavakuk the Navi... he said before Him, ‘Master of the Universe! Your children have set their faces to me, for I am like a household member before You; I swear by Your great name that I shall not move from here until you have mercy on Your children!’ ”

“Rain began to drop. His disciples said to him, ‘Master! Let us see you and not die [if it continues to rain lightly like this, we’ll die of drought and not merit to further see you]! It seems to us that it is only raining now to release you of your vow!’ So Choni said before Him, ‘It is not for such that I asked but rather, rain for cisterns, ponds and caverns!’ And it rained with fury. His disciples said to him, ‘Master! Let us see you and not die! It seems to us that it is only raining now to destroy the world!’ So Choni said before Him, ‘It is not for such that I asked but rather, rains of good will, blessing and benevolence!’ And it rained in proper measure.”

But thanks to Choni’s prayers, it now was raining so much that “all the people went up on the Temple Mount due to the rain. They said to him, ‘Master! Just as you prayed for rain to descend, likewise pray for the rain to depart!’ ” So this time, Choni’s disciples asked him to pray for the rain to stop entirely.

And the Talmud continues: “He said to them, ‘I have a tradition that one does not pray over an excess of good. Nevertheless...’ He said before Him, ‘Master of the Universe! Your People Israel whom You brought out of Egypt can tolerate neither an excess of good nor an excess of punishment. When You were angry with them, they could not stand; when you bestowed good upon them, they could not stand. May it be Your will before you that the rains stop and there be relief in the world!’ The wind immediately blew and the clouds dispersed and the sun shone.”

So the Talmud concludes: “From here we learn that when a tzadik decrees, G-d fulfills.” Still, the Talmud continues: “Rabbi Shimon Ben Shetach sent [Choni] a message: ‘Were you not [the respected] Choni, I would have decreed excommunication upon you!’”

Rabbi Shimon Ben Shetach was a great leader in his own right—in fact, he was the president of the Sanhedrin (the ancient Jewish “Supreme Court”). He did not like the way

in which Choni had seemingly forced G-d to do what he wanted—i.e. “I swear by Your great name that I shall not move from here...” (Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 23a).

But what’s interesting is that Choni HaMaagal is not the first person in Jewish history to use that approach. And that brings us right to the greatest Jew and greatest Jewish leader of all time, Moshe Rabbeinu.

In this week’s Torah portion of Behaalos’cha, we read about Miriam at the end of the Parshah, in Chap. 12.

The story starts with Moshe Rabbeinu complaining to G-d, “I cannot bear this entire nation by myself.” And so G-d advises him to appoint “seventy men from the elders of Israel... and they shall bear with you the burden of the people.” And indeed, Moshe chose seventy elders; they gathered around the Ohel Moed and there, the spirit of prophecy dwelt upon them.

But two of these chosen elders, Eldad and Meidad, stayed in the main camp. “They said, ‘We are not suitable for this prominence’” (Rashi). Nevertheless, “They prophesized in the camp”—the spirit of prophecy had rested upon them. But then, Moshe Rabbeinu’s son Gershom rushed to notify his father, “Eldad and Meidad are prophesizing in the camp!”

So Rashi (Bamidbar 11:1) comes along and tells us: “Miriam was by Tziporah’s side when it was told to Moshe that Eldad and Meidad were prophesizing in the camp. When Tziporah heard, she said, ‘Woe to their wives if they are slated for prophecy; they will abstain from their wives like my husband abstained from me!’ And from that, Miriam knew [that Moshe was abstinent] and she informed Aharon.” Basically, Miriam spoke what we call *Lashon Hara*, or gossip, to her brother Aharon about their brother Moshe and his relationship with his wife. Aharon and Miriam then complained (as the Torah continues), “Was it only to Moshe that G-d spoke? Was it not also with us that He spoke?”, to which Rashi adds, “And we did not abstain from the ‘way of the land’!” And then G-d revealed Himself to them and said, “Why were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moshe?” How dare you doubt the behavior of Moshe Rabbeinu when “he is trustworthy throughout My entire Household.” And immediately after that, “and behold, Miriam was leprous as snow.”

So the Midrash (Avos D’Rabi Nasan, 1st Edition, 9:2), says: “At that time, Aharon said to Moshe, ‘Moshe, my brother—do you think that this leprosy was put (only) on Miriam? Why, it is placed on none other than the flesh of our father, Amram!’” In other words, Aharon was saying that Miriam’s Tzoraas was a stain on the entire family.

Well, continues the Midrash, “At that time, Moshe *drew a small circle* [on the ground] and stood in it and asked [G-d] for mercy for her, and he said, ‘I shall not move from here until my sister Miriam is healed,’ as the verse states, ‘G-d, I beseech You—please heal her!’”

And indeed, G-d accepted his prayer and healed her immediately (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer 80:54).

So there you have it that Moshe Rabbeinu, 1,300 years before Choni HaMaagal, acted in the exact same way.

And that brings us to Chavakuk the Navi.

In the Tanach, we have one volume of Neviim known as the *Trei Asar*, or “The Twelve.” Trei Asar is a compilation of the prophecies of twelve Neviim bound together in one book, the reason being that they are very short prophecies. For example, the Prophet Jonah (Yonah), with whom we’re all familiar, he of giant fish fame. The story may be famous, but it’s the whole Book of Yonah in its entirety. So Trei Asar consists of 11 other Neviim who also had short prophecies—including the Navi Chavakuk, who lived at the end of the First Temple era, about 2,600 years ago. The Book of Chavakuk consists of a total of three chapters—and what’s interesting about this particular prophet is that he turns to G-d Himself with words of rebuke.

Most of the Neviim speak words of rebuke to the Jewish Nation in the name of G-d. Chavakuk, however, addresses G-d with claims and complaints. Chavakuk saw how the Kingdom of Ashur was progressively disappearing, with the new lead actor on the world stage now being the Kingdom of Bavel (Babylon). Chavakuk also prophetically saw that Bavel was going to destroy Jerusalem.

Now, during the First Temple era, the notion that the Temple was going to be destroyed was something that people didn’t want to talk about. They didn’t even want to think about it. And so when Chavakuk saw the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash in his vision, he was shocked—and came to G-d with words of protest, with a complaint over how G-d could allow such a thing to happen. He said, “Until when, O G-d, must I cry out and You not listen, must I shout violently at You and You not deliver?” And that’s just the first chapter of the Book of Chavakuk.

In Chapter 2, the Navi states: “On my watch I will stand, and I will set myself upon a fortress, and I will look out to see what He will speak to me and what I will reply when I am reproved.” And Rashi says, “Chavakuk *drew a circle and stood inside* and said, ‘I shall not move from here until I hear what G-d shall speak to me on this question.’” And the Mahari Kra adds, “The Prophet said, ‘Master of the Universe! I shall not move from here until You notify me of the end of this exile!’ ”

So here we see that Chavakuk acted like Moshe Rabbeinu before him and like Choni HaMaagal many years after him. However, Moshe Rabbeinu asked G-d for recovery for his sister and was answered immediately; Choni HaMaagal asked for sustenance for the Jewish Nation via rain and was answered immediately; while Chavakuk wanted an answer to the question of all questions—“When will the exile end?” He essentially wanted to know when Moshiach would come.

And then the chapter continues: “And G-d answered me... For there shall be another vision for the appointed time... though it tarry, wait for it, for it shall surely come; it shall not delay.” And the Talmud says, “This verse pierces and descends to the abyss... blasted be the spirit of end-calculators who would say, ‘Since the end has arrived and it has not come, it will not come later’; instead, wait for it, as the verse states, ‘Though it tarry, wait for it.’ ” And Rashi explains, “Just as the abyss has no end, so too is no person able to stand at the end of this verse that there is no Moshiach end-time; rather, “Though it tarry, wait for it,” for it has no end (Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 97b).

Now, in many prayer books, the Thirteen Principles of Faith based on the Rambam appear at the end of the Shachris morning prayers. And the first of these is to believe in the Creator of the Universe and that everything is from Him, followed by believing that the Torah is from heaven, to believe in Moshe Rabbeinu, and so on.

In Principle No.12, it states: “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the anointed one,” and then it continues, “And even though he may tarry, I will still wait for him every day to come.” And this concept of still waiting even “if he tarries” was taught to us by the Navi Chavakuk.

So the Rebbe asks, “What’s the idea of a circle? Seemingly, he could have stood in a corner and said the same thing! But the reason that it was a circle is that every point on the circle is equally distant from the center, and no point on the circle is greater or lesser than any other point. With every other shape, whether a square, triangle or whatever, you have points, angles, corners, and so on, with differences between each. But with a circle, everything is equal. And spiritually speaking, the circle represents the concept of sacrifice—that everything is the same and there are no differences... and that’s the idea of ‘drawing a circle’ and therefore producing rain; by means of praying with sacrifice” (Shabbos Parshas Pinchos 5744, Sichos Kodesh Vol. II pg. 289).

In general, when it comes to each of us as individuals, there are differences between us when it comes to doing mitzvos. And perhaps the best classic example of that is the fact that you’ll virtually always have more Jews in synagogue on Yom Kippur than you’ll have on a typical Shabbos. Likewise, more Jews keep Bris Milah (circumcision) than other mitzvos. In both cases, that means that there are those mitzvos that are generally more important to Jews as a whole than other mitzvos.

But along comes the circle to remind us that and symbolize for us the fact that all mitzvos are equal.

When we contemplate the fact that all mitzvos are equally G-d’s Will, then it does not matter what He asks of us—the moment it’s His request, there’s no difference whether He’s asking us to fast on Yom Kippur or say “Modeh Ani” in the morning. If a person knows that by doing such-and-such, he or she is doing G-d’s Will and giving G-d pride and joy, then that individual is accomplishing both—and with the same passion.

And that, my friends, is the distinction of Choni HaMaagal. To him, all the mitzvos were like the points on a circle. They were all the same. He was prepared to sacrifice his life even “for a minor detail in the words of the Sages.” And so, when a person serves G-d in such a manner, G-d responds in kind, measure for measure, with G-d likewise fulfilling all the person’s requests. And that’s the common denominator between Moshe Rabbeinu, Chavakuk the Prophet, and Choni HaMaagal—all three of them served G-d with self-sacrifice, down to every last detail.

So what is the lesson for us, my friends? The lesson is to step into the circle ourselves.

The lesson is to surround ourselves with a Jewish atmosphere and with Jewish matters—not just on a Yom Kippur, or a Shabbos or a holiday, but also throughout the entire week, too. When a Jew gets home or walks into the office, it should feel like a Jewish home or Jewish office—a mezuzah on the door, a holy book on the table, a Jewish photo or image on the wall, and so on.

It is incumbent upon us, my friends, to create for ourselves that Jewish atmosphere, that Jewish circle.

And when you’re in the circle, in that Jewish zone, your prayers are accepted a lot quicker.