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G-d wants your heart!

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Vaeschanan

G-d wants your heart!

I'd like to tell you a story I heard told by Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv and the former Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel.

Immediately after surviving the Holocaust as a child, he found himself in a French respite home that had been turned into an orphanage for child survivors, together with another 200 kids from the age of eight through 20.

One day, after eating lunch, the "House Mother," Rachel Mintz, addressed the children and asked them to appear in the town center at 4:00 in the afternoon to welcome some special guests: the mayor, the police chief and the commander of the local military garrison. She didn't tell them that the whole purpose of the event was to honor the supporters of the orphanage.

To her surprise, the children said that they did not want to participate in the event.

One of the kids asked, "Where were all these people when the Germans murdered our parents? Now, when it's popular to take pictures with Buchenwald orphans, then they all show up?!" Indeed, immediately after the Holocaust, there was great interest in these kids. And so these kids felt that the politicians came only with the intention of buttering up their relationships with the community—and not with their best interests at heart.

But Mrs. Mintz tried to convince the kids to participate in the event. She told them that the guests were supposed to give each one of them a personal present. But even that didn't appease them. One of the lads got up and said, "We don't need their presents. We have no connection with these people. And we're not interested in getting anything from them."

Finally, as she stood in the doorway of the dining room, Mrs. Mintz turned to the boys and said: "I never asked you for anything—so do it for me." The boys could not argue with that. So the boys' leader decided that they would participate in the meeting but not take part in the event—they would not clap and they would not even look their guests in the eye.

Now imagine for a moment what the scene must have looked like. Here was this special event in the honor of the orphanage kids, with the attendance of special guests, and all the kids are just sitting on the grass looking down and their eyes closed tight.

Mrs. Mintz exceeded the event in French and translated her words into Polish. All the guests who were invited to speak barely got out a sentence or two. The atmosphere was very tense. After all, it's not pleasant to speak to people who aren't participating and aren't even ready to look at you.

But the last person called upon to speak was a man named Yosef Goldberg. He was a Polish Jew and a survivor of Auschwitz, where he had lost his wife and kids. Before the war, he had had business in France, and after he had been fortunate enough to survive, he dedicated all his money, time and energy towards the orphans. "These are the only kids he has," said Mrs. Mintz in introducing him.

At that moment, without any advance planning, all the boys picked up their heads and looked at him with profound self-identification and great love—finally, here was a Jew who was one of ours!

Yosef Goldberg held onto the microphone with both hands trembling, but could not say a word. For several long moments he stood like that, and despite his best efforts to control his emotions, he only managed to say three words: "Kinder! Tayereh kinder!" Children, precious children! He then burst into bitter weeping.

At that minute, Yosef Goldberg succeeded in working a miracle. Along with him, the children's eyes suddenly welled up with tears. At first, each cried quietly. But suddenly, all at once, all the boys burst out crying out loud, a liberating and healthy cry. And together with them cried all those in attendance at the event—adults, politicians and the entire crowd.

The crying continued for at least five minutes. At that point, a teenager named Aaron got up and addressed the guests. He said: "In the name of all my friends, I want to thank you all—not for coming, because we didn't want you to visit, and not for your gifts, because we're not interested in them. We want to thank you for the biggest present of all: the ability to cry."

Aaron continued: "Since the war started I've been unable to laugh. When they killed my parents before my eyes, I did not cry. When they whipped me, I did not cry. Through all the years, I starved and froze in the cold but I did not cry. From the moment I was liberated, I've gone on thinking that I'm not a normal human being and never will be. I can't fall asleep at night—I lie awake in bed thinking that I am a robot: I eat, I sleep, but I feel nothing, like a machine. Who would want to marry me, a man who doesn't know how to cry and doesn't know how to laugh—a man without a heart? It seemed to me that I had a stone in my chest, not a human heart."

"That's what I thought until five minutes ago. No longer. Now I cried, and a lot. And I say to you now that someone who is capable of crying today will also be capable of laughing tomorrow, to enjoy life and be a gentleman—and for that I give you my thanks."

In this week's Torah portion, we read the famous Shma verses in the Torah for the first time: "Shma Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad... V'Ahavta eis Hashem Elokecha..."

On this, Rashi comments: "Do His words out of love"—meaning, it's not enough to do a mitzvah, but one must do it with love too. And this is not the only mitzvah that the Torah expects us to do with emotion and with feeling.

For example, on Sukkos, it's not enough that we have to sit in the sukkah and make the brachah on the lulav and esrog—in addition to all that, there is the mitzvah on Sukkos of "V'samachta b'chagecha"—and you shall rejoice on your festival." This means that you simply need to be happy on this holiday.

Another example is the holiday of Purim. On Purim, it's not enough to hear the story of the Megillah and to give out Mishloach Manos food gifts to your friends—you also need to be happy. And on Tisha B'Av the Torah expects us to truly feel pain for the Destruction of the Beis Hamikdash.

But why is this? Isn't the most important thing to just do the mitzvah—the physical act of the mitzvah? So why is it not enough for us to simply do the mitzvos? What's so important about how we feel about it? What's really the difference?

The answer is that G-d doesn't want robots. He doesn't want or need automatons to carry out dry, soulless actions like machines. G-d wants human beings with feelings, with passions, who sometimes are glad and sometimes are sad, but at least human—not machines. As the Sages say, "Rachmana liba ba'i"—the Merciful One (meaning G-d) wants heart.

Now, have you ever heard of "Yekkeh's"? This is a phrase that refers exclusively to Jews of German heritage. (I don't know where the word comes from.) And Germany, as you may know, is famous (or notorious) for people being extremely punctual and exact. In Germany, everything starts and ends precisely on time.

People there do everything with cold logic and don't let their feelings distract them.

A Chabad rabbi once said that he had joined the morning prayer services, Shacharis, at a Yekkeh shul. And he saw, to his surprise, that a moment before the prayers were supposed to start, they turned the news radio on in the shul—and as soon as they heard the announcer say, "It's six o'clock," they started the prayer services.

So after the prayer services, the Chabadnik turned to his friend who had brought him there and asked him, "What was that all about? I never saw such a thing in a shul! Playing the news radio?!"

So his friend told him, "Listen—every morning there used to be a whole battle here. Everyone would say that his watch had the exact time and that we need to start davening when his watch said it was six o'clock. This went on until the gabbai came along and decided that we'd play the news radio before we'd start davening, and when the announcer would declare that it was six o'clock, then we'd start..."

Once the Rebbe Rashab met with the famous Dr. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology. Dr. Freud asked him what Chasidic philosophy was. The Rebbe replied that "the goal of Chasidus is to build a bridge between the mind and the heart—or at least to create a telephone or electrical connection between them."

But here we can ask a big question: How can G-d command us to love something?

It's possible to order someone to do something. It's possible to order him to speak certain words or even to think certain thoughts. But it's impossible to force a person to feel certain feelings. This is something that can only come from within—either you have it or you don't.

And so it is impossible to force a person who is in a bad mood, or depressed, to be happy on Sukkos, or to feel sad on Tisha B'Av. If he doesn't feel sadness or pain at the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, how is forcing him to feel sadness or pain going to help? He doesn't feel those feelings!

So the answer, my friends, is that the Torah gives human beings the tools to help him or her become happy.

In Halachah it says that if you buy a gift for your wife in honor of the holiday, along with treats for the kids and a table laden with meat and wine, then there's a very good chance that you'll be in good spirits. If, on Purim, you say L'chayim once, twice, a third time and more, then it's almost certain that joy will soon arrive.

And in like manner on Tisha B'Av—we don't eat, we don't wear leather shoes, we don't shower, we sit on a low stool and we recite lamentations... and then we remember all the anguish the Jews went through. Then we can say that you'll probably feel some pain.

But the real question is: How do we arrive at feeling love for G-d? And the answer is simple: Gratitude. When a Jewish person says the "Modeh Ani" each morning, remembering that G-d has given him another beautiful day; when he recites a blessing before eating food; when he gives a tenth of his income to charity; that all reminds him that it all comes from G-d—and then he has a good chance of coming to love G-d.

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