

The Closeness of Hashem

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Maimonides (Rambam, 1135-1204) presents the 13 essential principles of our faith in his introduction to the 10th chapter of Mishnah Sanhedrin. The eighth and ninth of these doctrinal statements present the G-d-given origin of the Torah (i.e. *Torah min hashamayim*) and its immutability. These indispensable precepts of Judaism form the foundation for understanding the Torah, and help define our approach to this most precious gift that was bestowed upon us by our Creator. They teach us that it was the Almighty, Himself, who gave us the Torah and that it will never change. By extrapolation, they teach us, as well, that each and every verse of the Torah, regardless of its content, is a pearl of wisdom waiting to be discovered and analyzed. In addition, since the Torah is G-d-given and Hashem is perfect, the Torah, as well, is perfect. Therefore, when we encounter what appears to be an extra word or some other seeming textual anomaly, we are obligated to try to understand the reason for the unusual formulation.

The final verse of our *parasha* (*Sefer Bamidbar* 15:41) is also the last verse of the three paragraphs that compose our recitation of *Kriat Sh'ma* (*Sh'ma Yisrael*). It contains a puzzling repetition: “**I am Hashem**, your G-d, Who has removed you from the land of Egypt to be a G-d unto you; **I am Hashem**, your G-d.” (Translation, *Artscroll Tanach*) We must ask, “Why is the phrase ‘I am Hashem, your G-d’ repeated?” This apparently unnecessary repetition was noted

during the Mishnaic period in the halachic Midrash to *Sefer Bamidbar* known as the *Sifrei*, and during the Talmudic period in *Talmud Bavli, Menachot* 44a. Both explanations are virtually identical. The passage in the *Sifrei* reads as follows:

Hashem *Elokeinu* commanded us a relatively easy commandment to perform. And it is stated “I am *Hashem*, your G-d I am *Hashem*, your G-d” two times. One time refers to the idea that Hashem will reward [those who deserve reward] in the future, and the second time refers to the idea that Hashem will punish [those who deserve punishment] in the future.

In essence, the repetition of “I am *Hashem*, your G-d” teaches us the theological principle of *S’char v’ Onesh* (Reward and Punishment). Each one of us will stand *din v’cheshbon* (the final accounting) before our Maker when we reach 120. Nothing goes unnoticed. Nothing is disregarded. Hashem will “replay” our lives to us in the minutest detail, and enable us to see that all of our rationalizations have been totally without merit. On the positive side, however, all of our merits and even our positive thoughts will come to our defense when Hashem determines our ultimate fate.

A holistic and quite novel interpretation of the repetition of our phrase “I am *Hashem*, your G-d” is found in the great Chasidic work, *Kedushat Levi*, written by Rabbi Levi Yitzchak ben Meir of Berdichev, Russia (1740-1810), known fondly throughout the Jewish world as “the Berdichever.” He begins by focusing upon a fundamental theological and philosophical principle of Torah living: “The general rule is that man must always be conscious that all of his words, thoughts, and actions [literally ‘movements’] make an impression in Heaven.” Thus, we must remember that every word, act, and deed that we perform is recorded, as it were, in Hashem’s ledger. Moreover, the Berdichever states, this is “a major tenet in serving the Creator.” This is so

since “Hashem, may He be blessed, knows all of man’s thoughts.” In addition, “His divine Providence (*hashgacha pratit*) is omnipresent and over all of mankind.” He continues and weaves his explanation of our verse’s repetition of “I am *Hashem*, your G-d” into his inspiring analysis:

And this is the essence of the service of man toward G-d that he recognize and be fully knowledgeable that Hashem, may He be blessed, has His Divine Providence upon him and upon all of his ways. This is what the Torah means when it says “I am *Hashem*, your G-d, Who has removed you from the land of Egypt to be a G-d unto you” [G-d as our Redeemer] and that you must be fully cognizant of “I am *Hashem*, your G-d” as referring to Hashem as He who ever exercises His Divine Providence upon us.

I believe that these sources teach us an invaluable lesson. Quite often, many in the non-religious world feel adrift and without purpose. They fruitlessly search for meaning in their lives through conspicuous consumption and the endless pursuit of pleasure. Indeed, to paraphrase Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski, they often trade pleasure for true happiness. Moreover, Hashem is an immanent part of our lives, since His Divine Providence protects each and every one of us. Our connection to the Creator brings meaning and value to our lives. In addition, we are never alone, since G-d is always close to us. As King David stated so beautifully in *Sefer Tehillim* 145:18: “The L-rd is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth.”

May the Almighty grant us the wisdom to recognize His unceasing presence in our lives so that we, in turn, may be *mekadash sh'mo* (sanctify His holy Name) forever more. *V'chane yihi ratzon*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdbe718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.