

Parashat Vayechi 5775, 2015:

Living to Serve Hashem

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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 bat Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

The first verse of our *parasha*, “And Jacob lived in the land of Egypt for seventeen years, and Jacob's days, the years of his life, were a hundred and forty seven years,” motivates us to ask an essential question: “What is life?” This question has captivated some of the world’s greatest thinkers, philosophers and theologians since time immemorial. It is, after all, the query that is at the center of man’s existence. Little wonder then, that it has been answered in myriad ways throughout the course of human history. It seems that each civilization and society has had its own answer. Some of these answers have been radically at odds with the spirit of Torah life, while others have enhanced the depth and beauty of Jewish living. As always, however, we must look to the Torah and its Sages for an authoritative response to such a central and fundamental question.

The *Siddur* (Prayer Book) guides us toward an authentic Jewish answer to our question. The *birchat hachodesh* (monthly prayer announcing the new Jewish month) provides us with clear insights into what constitutes “life” according to our Sages. In this prayer we beseech Hashem for a month filled with goodness and blessing. We entreat Him for long and peaceful lives. Specifically, we ask for lives replete with peace, goodness, blessing, sustenance, physical health, wealth and honor. Moreover, we ask for lives in which there

is awe of heaven, fear of sin and love of Torah. All of this is within the context of asking for lives in which our heartfelt requests will be fulfilled for the good. (Based upon the *Artscroll Siddur* translation)

Life, as formulated in this prayer, is like a diamond. It is composed of many facets that are themselves comprised of the multitude of our physical and spiritual needs. In addition, our relationship with Hashem emerges as the single most important aspect of our lives. This *bracha* teaches us quite clearly that everything in our lives stems directly from *chasdei Hashem* (Hashem's kindness). Moreover, peace, goodness, blessing, sustenance, physical health, wealth and honor collectively have but one purpose: to enable us to live lives "in which there is awe of heaven and fear of sin ... and in which we will have love of Torah..." In sum, every good for which we long is subordinate to one macroscopic purpose, namely, to serve Hashem.

What, in turn, does it mean to serve Hashem? Perhaps we can gain insight into the proper answer to this question by first recognizing who in our tradition received the appellation "avdi" ("My servant"). The first to receive this title was *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe): "Not so is My servant Moses; he is faithful throughout My house." (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:7; this, and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own) How do we understand the content of this expression? Why was Moshe "avdi?" The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893), in his classic work of Torah analysis, *Ha'amek Davar*, suggests that we should focus on the second half of this verse in order to understand exactly why Moshe was called "My servant":

Moshe was fully cognizant of all aspects of the Tetragrammaton (*shame hameforash*, [the complete name of G-d]) through which the heavens and earth were created. Nonetheless,

he never did anything [as G-d's representative] based upon his own predilections or desires [*b'emunat l'vavo*]. One is called "faithful" if, and only if, he has the ability to act [on behalf of his own self-interests] yet refrains from doing so.

The Netziv provides us with a profound understanding of the term "*avdi*." True *avdei Hashem* (servants of Hashem) do their utmost to ensure that all of their actions are *l'shame shamaim* (for the purpose of serving Hashem). As such, authentic *avdei Hashem* attempt, with every ounce of their being, to be "faithful throughout My [Hashem's] house," in the sense that Rav Berlin has defined. This, then, is one reason why Moshe was so deserving of this honorific title.

Moshe is called "*avdi*" four times throughout *Tanach*; it appears he personified this *eved Hashem* (servant of Hashem) quality when he acted in the role of the greatest *navi* (prophet) to ever live:

The L-rd descended in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the Tent. He called to Aaron and Miriam, and they both went out. He said, "Please listen to My words. If there be prophets among you, [I] the L-rd will make Myself known to him in a vision; I will speak to him in a dream. Not so is My servant Moses; he is faithful throughout My house. With him I speak mouth to mouth; in a vision and not in riddles, and he beholds the image of the L-rd. So why were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 12:5-8):

In contrast, *Dovid Hamelech* (King David) received the title "*avdi*" no less than nine times within the Hebrew Bible. While *Dovid Hamelech* was clearly a *navi*, he seems to have reached the pinnacle of being an *eved Hashem* when he acted as a heroic individual. When did he achieve the heights of heroism? When did he most distinguish himself from those around him? At first glance, we might think that Dovid demonstrated his true nature when he single-handedly conquered Goliath, the gigantic and powerful Philistine warrior. After all, he did this to be *mekadash shame shamaim* (to sanctify Hashem's Name):

And David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with spear and javelin, and I come to you with the Name of the L-rd of Hosts, the G-d of the armies of Israel which you have taunted. This day, the L-rd will deliver you into my hand, and I shall slay you, and take off your head, and I shall give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines this day, to the fowl of the air and to the beasts of the earth, and all the earth shall know that Israel has a G-d. And all this assembly shall know that not with sword and javelin does the L-rd save, for the battle is the L-rd's, and He will deliver you into our hand.” And it was, when the Philistine arose and drew closer to David that David hastened and ran to the battle array, toward the Philistine. And David stretched his hand into the bag, and took a stone therefrom, and slung it, and he hit the Philistine in his forehead, and the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground. And David overpowered the Philistine with the slingshot and with the stone, and he smote the Philistine and slew him: and no sword was in David's hand. (*Sefer Shmuel I*: 17:45-50)

Chazal (our Sages of blessed Memory), however, had an entirely different view of authentic heroism: “Ben Zoma would say: ... Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations. As is stated (*Sefer Mishle* 16:32), ‘Better one who is slow to anger than one with might, one who rules his spirit than the captor of a city.’” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1, translation, chabad.org/library, underlining my own)

As great as Dovid surely was at the moment of his confrontation with the gigantic and G-d-rejecting Philistine warrior, I would submit that he achieved even greater heights of heroic grandeur in the manner in which he faced himself, following the incident with Bathsheva. In *Sefer Shmuel II*: 12: 1-12, Natan the prophet berated Dovid, first via an allegory, and then explicitly, for having taken Uriah's wife, Bathsheva, as his own.

Nonetheless, *Chazal* exonerate his behavior and state:

R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in R. Jonathan's name: Whoever says that David sinned is merely erring, for it is said, “And David behaved himself wisely in all his ways: and the L-rd was with him.” [*Sefer Shmuel I*: 18:14] Is it possible that sin came to his hand, yet the Divine Presence was with him? Then how do I interpret, “In what manner have you despised the word of the L-rd, to do that which is evil in his sight?” [*Sefer Shmuel II*: 12:9] - He wished to do [evil], but did not. (*Talmud Bavli* 56a, *Soncino Talmud* translation with my emendations)

Dovid, however, most definitely viewed his actions in an entirely different light. He knew

that Natan was right, and that he had certainly come close to behaving as if he "... despised the word of the L-rd, to do what is evil in His eyes." Therefore, in perhaps his greatest heroic gesture, Dovid declared: "I have sinned against the L-rd." (*Sefer Shmuel* II: 12:13) A lesser man would have at first denied, and then rationalized, what he had done. Dovid was different. He immediately and unabashedly admitted the failure of his ways, accepted responsibility for his actions and declared himself guilty before G-d. This was true heroism in the highest and most Jewish sense. As a result, Hashem instantaneously forgave his semblance of sin and allowed him to live: "And Nathan said to David, 'Also the L-rd has removed your sin; you shall not die.'" (Ibid.) Thus, Dovid was an authentic *eved Hashem* and deserving of the title "*avdi*" as a hero of the spirit. He truly exemplified the holy words of the prophet Zechariah who declared: "*Lo b'chail, v'lo b'koach ki im b'ruchi amar Hashem Tzivakot*" ("Not by military force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit says the L-rd of Hosts.")

May Hashem give us the wisdom and understanding to live lives like Moshe and Dovid that are totally dedicated to serving Hashem. Then, we will finally begin to understand what it means to truly live – for we will then be authentic *avdei Hashem* (servants of Hashem). *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>.

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