

Shabbat Chanukah 5785, 2024:

The Power of Bechirah Chafshite—Free Will

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו כל בני ישראל, בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי הארץ

This week's *haftarah* contains a famous verse: "...This is the word of Hashem to Zerubbabel, saying: '*Lo b'chayil v'lo b'koach ki im b'ruchi amar Hashem Tzivakot*—Not by force and not by physical strength, but by My spirit,' says the L-rd of Hosts." (*Sefer Zechariah* 4:6, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) In some ways, it is as cryptic as it is renowned, as there is little consensus among our classic *meforshim* as to the content of this prophecy and its point of reference. This is particularly the case, since the preceding verse states:

And [there were] two olive trees near it [that is, the golden Menorah]; one on the right of the bowl, and one on its left. So I [Zechariah] answered and spoke to the angel who talked with me, saying, "What are these, my lord?" And the angel who spoke with me answered, and he said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" And I said, "No, my lord." (4:3-5)

Even a cursory reading of our passage leads to the conclusion that *lo b'chayil v'lo b'koach ki im b'ruchi amar Hashem Tzivakot* does not answer the angel's question posed to Zechariah regarding the *mashal* of the two olive trees.

In his collection of responsa entitled, *Beit Yitzchak*, Rabbi Yitzchak Yehudah Shmelkis *zatzal* (1827-1905) suggests that the olive trees symbolize the two inclinations within humankind, the *yetzer tov* (the good inclination, to the right of the Menorah) and the *yetzer harah* (the evil inclination, to the left of the Menorah). Moreover, in his view, the *malach* was really asking Zechariah, "Do you know why the Holy One blessed be He created human beings and placed within them two possible approaches [to life] and two inclinations?" To this the angel answered:

“*Lo b'chayil v'lo b'koach ki im b'ruchi amar Hashem Tzivakot*”—for if the Holy One blessed be He had not created the evil inclination, humankind would have been forced to perform each of their actions and there never would have been a place or an opportunity for *schar*—reward based upon their righteous and just [behaviors]. This, then, is the meaning of *lo b'chayil v'lo b'koach*, regarding all of humankind's actions [that would have been devoid of free choice], but rather, *ki im b'ruchi amar Hashem Tzivakot*—that is, solely through the G-d-endowed spirit of *habechirah hachafshite*—free choice—will a person plan and implement their actions... (Responsa *Yoreh Deah* II, *Petach HaBayit*, translation, brackets and underlining my own)

Rav Shmelkis' analysis is an exegetical tour de force. In relatively few words, he places Zechariah's *nevuah* squarely in the context of one of Judaism's most fundamental theological principles, namely, *bechirah chafshite*, that is the basis for the doctrine of *schar v'onesh*—Reward and Punishment.

We must always remember that while *bechirah chafshite* has great power, it carries with it great responsibility. In other words, it is crucial to recognize that each of our free-willed choices affects not only ourselves, but in a very real way, the entire world. Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon gave powerful voice to this idea when he declared:

Since the world is judged after the majority of its deeds, and the individual is judged after the majority of his actions, if he does one *mitzvah*, he should rejoice, for he has tilted the scales of justice for himself and the entire world *l'kaf zechut*—toward the side of merit. [Unfortunately, however,] if he does one *aveirah*—sin, woe unto him, for he has tilted the scales of justice for both himself and the entire world to the side of guilt. (*Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin* 40b, translation my own)

With Hashem's help may we ever be vigilant in our exercise of *bechirah chafshite* and recognize the power with which it is endowed. Moreover, may we ever be counted among those who bring the entire world *l'kaf zechut*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom and *Chanukah Sameach!*

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