

**DERASHA FOR YOM KIPPUR, Y.U.1**

**Introduction:** Will confine my remarks to one פסוק in אורי וישעי:

**אחת שאלתי מאת ה' אותה אבקש שבתי בבית ה' כל ימי חיי  
לחזות בנועם ה' ולבקר בהיכלו**

1. **אחת שאלתי מאת ה' אותה אבקש** ---the question is asked: why the redundancy of שאלתי-אבקש? Of course, from a literary point of view, this conforms to the biblical style of parallelism (הקבלה); nevertheless, there may well be some deeper meaning waiting to be ferreted out. One answer proffered by מילוטשוב is most interesting: that the **אחת שאלתי מאת ה'** is a request of God that I remember always to turn to ה', for He is the source of all--not human ingenuity or power, not science or technology. These latter are all the means, but the ultimate source of all help and salvation is **הקב"ה** and is to Him whom we must always turn.

Permit me to suggest a variation on that interpretation: I ask of Him that I always be a מבקש, learning to search, to seek out the truth of Torah; all the rest is details...The obverse is self-evident: *never be smug, satisfied...*

ר' חיים שמואלביץ סיפר כשהיה בחור נסע לבקר דודו ר' אברהם יפהן בישיבת נובהרדוק, ושאל לדודו, איזהו הבחור המובחר בישיבה. דודו הצביע על בחור אחד ואמר, "זהו העמקן הגדול בישיבה", ואח"כ על עוד בחור... "המתמיד"... "הבקי"... "ירא שמים"... אבל איזהו המובחר ביותר מכולם? ענה ראש הישיבה: זהו. אבל, שאל לדודו, הלא כבר מנית שבחים הרבה, במה הוא מצטיין? ענה ואמר: "הוא המבקש" של הישיבה--ובמשך שנים גדל בחור זה ותפס מקום נכבד בין גדולי דורנו, וה"ה ח"ר יעקב קניבסקי זצ"ל המכונה "דער סטייפלער".

So, each of us must learn to be a מבקש, a "searcher." Never be satisfied with your past attainments. Always dig deeper. The challenge of being a מבקש is an awesome one; it requires a gritty persistence, a single-minded pursuit of yet higher and deeper truths than you've attained thus far. And if you've reached a desirable certain level in your learning, start to work on your יראת שמים, and if you're fairly competent in that area, pay greater attention to your learning. And if you think you're somewhat accomplished in both areas, conduct a deep and sometimes painful search--in the area of מידות, because that is the final goal of both Torah and piety.

We shall soon recite, for the first of many times this Yom Kippur, the וידוי. It is a long and imposing list of sins. The שפת אמת asks: why is there no mention of what is, an many texts and contexts regarded as the most serious of sins, namely, that of ביטול תורה? His answer is that this is implied in בבלי דעת, for the purpose of Torah is to teach us to know how to conduct our עבודת ה', and if we disrupt our Torah learning, we will not know how to serve Him.

In the same vein I suggest that בלי דעת implies the ultimate end of מצוות and תורה as well, namely, the ennoblement of one's character. Torah should ideally lead to זיכוך, לא ניתנו המצוות אלא לצרף בהן את הבריות, and R. Meir long ago taught that

In that case, we must make special efforts to keep our learning and piety pure and unadulterated, and never use them as a club to beat others whom we may superciliously regard as lesser and inferior in either of these realms. To use these remarkable talents or achievements for the base purpose of debasing others or to aggrandize one's self is to deny the supernal knowledge that they must contribute to us, and that is--to use them to make of us better, kinder, more Godly people. That would be a case of the **בלי דעת חטא**. To be a true **מבקש** means to search out such negative propensities, and seek to purify and ennoble our characters.

We shall say several times during the course of this Yom Kippur: **זה דור דורשיו מבקשי**. Our--your--generation must learn to be searchers of this kind. **פניך יעקב סלה**.

2. **שָׁבְתִי בְּבֵית ה' כָּל יְמֵי חַיִּי** -- can David be serious? He's a King, an absolute monarch, with myriads of administrative and leadership details, as well as a successful military man--and he plans to spend *all* of his time, *all* of his life, in the **בית המדרש**??

Clearly, there is a deeper significance to David's prayer. I suggest it is this: "dwelling in House of the Lord" is not a matter of hours spent in the **ביה"מ** but the mentality, the attitude, the self-image and identity that one brings to his whole life. It is existential, not quantitative. In **רבי יוסי בן קיסמא** we read the story of **אבות פרק ו'**:

אמר רבי יוסי בן קיסמא, פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך ופגע בי אדם אחד ונתן לי שלום והחזירתי לו שלום, אמר לי רבי מאיזה מקום אתה? אמרתי לו מעיר גדולה של חכמים וסופרים אני. אמר לי, רבי, רצונך שתדור עמנו במקומנו ואני אתן לך אלף אלפים דינרי זהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות. אמרתי לו, אם אתה נותן לי כל כסף וזהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות שבעולם איני דר אלא במקום תורה

Why this resistance to a generous request? The answer is that this exchange was not simply about the advisability of an out-of-town "shtelle"--because why not?--but the question of R. Yossi's *identity*, his **מקום**, his *locus*. Note the emphasis: **אמר לי, רבי**... **מאיזה מקום אתה**... רצונך שתדור עמנו **במקומנו**... איני דר אלא **במקום תורה**. The dialogue did not concern just a move of venue, just taking a position in another community. It involved a wrenching change of identity, a radical reconfiguration of one's very essence. That R. Yossi was rightly unwilling to do. His **מקום** must remain a **מקום תורה**.

In Halakha too we find the concept of **מקום**. If a man wishes to travel more than the 2000 cubits--he must make an **עירוב** by establishing his **מקום** in an area which will allow him to walk to his destination within the requisite distance. What I am referring to is the psychological and existential analogue of this formal halakhic construct, for each of us has his fundamental **מקום**, and where that is makes all the difference in the world

So it is with us, **בני הישיבה**: time spent is of course important; the more the hours you spend in learning, the greater will be your achievements as **בני תורה**. But the ultimate criterion of whether you are a true **בן תורה** is not quantitative but qualitative: whether you are, in the deepest recesses of your mind, a host or a guest in the **בית המדרש**. One can spend 10 hours a day here, but if his mind is in Wall, Street or the laboratory or in social settings, the latter are his **מקום**. Whereas one can be a business-man or professional who spends the best part of the week elsewhere, but if his heart and mind



pull him into the בית מדרש, if he feels in his very being that this is his home-base, then this is his identity. The Baal Shem Tov taught that where a man's thoughts are, that is where he is... The most challenging question you must ask yourself is this: is your identity grounded here? Or, in other words, where is your true existential-psychological מקום?

3. לחזות בנועם ה' ולבקר בהיכלו... What does it mean to "look at the pleasantness" of ה'? Is this a case of spiritual hedonism...? Certainly not! What David intends, I submit, is something quite different. To understand it we must read the verse a bit differently: the ב of בנועם is like the ב of בראשית according to Rashi, i.e., *to look upon my fellow men and all of life by means of the pleasantness of God!* Unfortunately, we who "dwell in the House of the Lord" sometimes become insular and restrict our אהבת ישראל only to those whom we know, who are like us, who do not strike us as alien and different... But our true task is to look at them as brothers and sisters who, even if they may have strayed, are still worthy of נועם ה'.

Similarly: ולבקר בהיכלו not mean "visit" (modernism). Rashi quotes Dunash that the word comes from בוקר, i.e., to come to the היכל every morning. But that is problematic, because if David already asked for שבתי בבית ה'—even if it includes the concept of self-identity, but certainly includes primarily *being there*—why want to add that also show up in the morning? My variation on this interpretation is: *to bring in to the היכל a ray of light, a breath of fresh air, a glint of dawn, of morning...* That is how we use נועם ה'—to further the hope and cheer and sanguine outlook of those less fortunate than us, whether physically or financially or Jewishly.

It means we have got to behold others not with a grimace, not as either feared or detested "outsiders," but as אחינו כל בית ישראל no matter whether they agree or disagree with us, whether they are more or less "frum," whether they approve or disapprove of the Oslo II agreements...

Even more critical for the future of our people is the difficult encounter we now face with our fellow Jews, one even more fateful than the differences amongst us as to the Palestinians, and that is: the emerging *Kulturkampf* on the nature of the State and the character of Jewish life. Will we be an עם ה'—or a Jewish Singapore? Does becoming a prosperous state require that we abandon Sinai for Sony... that exchange the Psalms of David for an uncircumcised statue of David?

The battle is shaping up—indeed, we are almost in it front and center—and we need very much to decide on how this struggle will be conducted. I maintain that now more than ever is it crucial to approach these fellow Jews with acceptance and love and fellowship.

On the Mishnah (Avot 1), that אומר הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן אוהב שלום ורודף שלום אוהב הלל אוהב תורה, the interpretation of the Netziv is well-known: the love of fellow men recommended by Hillel is specifically those remote from Torah; otherwise, why direct us to "bring them close to Torah?" I would like to add to that: the word וּמִקְרָב comes not only from the root of קרוב, to bring close, but is also related to קרב, to do battle. *Even when we are engaged in a relentless struggle with fellow Jews as to the nature and destiny of Jewish life, we must love them, treat them with dignity and*

*tenderness, and draw them close to Torah!* That is not an easy task, but it is a noble one. The reverse approach is not quite guaranteed to win friends and influence people. And this *Kulturkampf* is just that: who wins the hearts and minds of Jews the world over.

Our posture towards our fellow Jews ought to be one of bringing them the dawn, not darkness, of hope and not despair, of extending your arms to draw them close and not clenching your fists to warn them off. We must, here again, imitate the Almighty-- אתה נותן יד לפושעים וימינך פשוטה לקבל שבים.

When we do that, we will experience the beginning of this *perek* of Tehillim:

אורי וישעי ה'--If we will bring His light to others, He will bring help and salvation to us.

May the new year that is upon us indeed be one of light and salvation, for us and for all Israel, as we learn to be life-long searchers, confirm our true spiritual מקום, and bring the dawn of נועם ה' into the lives of our fellow Jews and fellow humans.