

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summaries of points from the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל
ש"פ פנחס תשכ"ו ד"ה ברוך הגומל בלתי מוגה
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THE GUILTY GIVING THANKS

BLESSED BE HE WHO GRANTS GOOD TO THOSE WHO ARE GUILTY, WHO HAS GRANTED GOOD to me. With these words, the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph Isaac, began his discourse on Shabbat Parshat Pinchas, 16 Tammuz, in 1927, after his complete release from Soviet imprisonment and exile. This was at the Kiddush after the prayers, and after he had made that blessing at the Reading of the Torah. It was a longer version of a discourse on the same theme which Rabbi Joseph Isaac had said earlier, on 13 Tammuz, the day he was actually freed.

Then at the Shabbat meal, the Previous Rebbe said another discourse: 'Lift up your hands to holiness, and bless G-d' (Ps.134:2). These discourses were preceded by one said on the 12th Tammuz, Tuesday of the preceding week, 'Hashem is with those who help me' (Ps.118:7)².

How do these discourses connect with each other?

In the third discourse, 'Blessed be He who grants good', Rabbi Joseph Isaac contrasts the text of this blessing, which emphasises the guilt of the individual, with the text of the blessing thanking G-d for working a miracle, which does not mention any suggestion of guilt³. This will be understood, says the Rebbe, by considering the final discourse, on the verse 'lift up your hands to holiness and

¹ Maamar Baruch Hagomel 5726 (1966), said on Shabbat Parshat Pinchas. It was not edited by the Rebbe. It was printed in Dvar Malchut Pinchas 5777, 5784.

² There were thus four discourses: the first on Tuesday 12 Tammuz, beginning 'Hashem is with those who help me'; the second and third, both beginning 'Blessed be He who grants good', on 13 Tammuz and then in a longer form on Shabbat 16 Tammuz at the Kiddush; and the fourth at the Shabbat meal later that day, beginning 'Lift up your hands to holiness'.

³ 'Blessed be G-d.. who worked a miracle for me in this place'.

bless the Divine [the Tetragrammaton]. G-d will bless you from Zion'. In this discourse R. Joseph Isaac asks what is meant by 'bless the Divine'. Surely, the Divine is the *source* of all blessings? How can we human beings 'bless' the Divine? He explains that our 'blessing'⁴ draws G-dliness from a higher level to a lower, from the Upper Tetragrammaton to the Lower, thus revealing the Divine in the world, which is the true purpose of existence. This causes blessing to flow to the person, from Zion, the source of his or her soul.

Considering the significance of the Tetragrammaton in this context, the Rebbe points out that there are two modes of Divine conduct of the world: the natural, relating to the Divine Name Elokim, and the miraculous, relating to the Tetragrammaton. The Tetragrammaton can be understood as the combination of the Hebrew words for 'being' in past present and future, for the Tetragrammaton is beyond time and space.

This transcendent, miraculous dimension can be seen as flowing into the finite and natural realm. This relates to the idea cited in Tanya⁵ that at first G-d created the universe with the attribute of Severity – Elokim. Then He joined also the Attribute of Mercy, revealed in the existence of the Zaddikim and the miracles of the Torah.

These two dimensions can also be seen in Torah and Mitzvot. Torah is timeless and beyond the limitations of existence, hence the Sages tell us that by studying the Torah laws of a burnt offering it is as if one had offered it, even if one is not a Priest, and it is not in the time of the Temple, and one is outside the Land of Israel. Mitzvot by contrast are specific to time, person and place. Another such polarity is that between service which is limited by one's understanding – such as loving G-d with all one's 'heart and soul', compared with service which transcends one's understanding, serving G-d 'with all your might'⁶.

The general purpose of life in this dark world, העולם HaOlam, which can be read as HeElem, concealment, created by Elokim, is to reveal the transcendent and miraculous Tetragrammaton, illuminating the darkness. Thus too transcendent Torah is drawn into the halachah⁷ and the Mitzvot, and one's transcendent bond with the Divine, one's suprarational dedication, informs one's service with heart and soul, and one's observance of the Mitzvot.

⁴ The Hebrew word for blessing relates to a verb *mavrich* meaning 'to draw from' as in agriculture, drawing a tendril from a vine to begin a new growth at some distance from the parent vine.

⁵ Tanya Part 2, chapter 5.

⁶ The Shema states: 'and you shall love the L-rd your G-d with all your hear and all your soul and all your might'. The last phrase is taken to mean service beyond all measure.

⁷ The discourse adds a discussion of the difference between Torah learnt as halachah, Jewish Law, and Torah which is simply analysis and exploration, which does not lead to practical action. Torah leading to practical action is the true goal.

But in order to achieve this level of service, one first has to ‘lift up one’s hands in holiness’, which signifies washing the hands to purify them. The hands represent all our interactions with the world. We have to seek that this should be pure, and without any hint of negativity, such as ‘a Mitzva which comes through a transgression’, and, as the Sages point out, a Torah scholar has to be particularly careful in his behaviour ⁸.

The Rebbe suggests that this explains the rationale of the fact that the discourse ‘Lift up your hands to holiness’ was preceded by the discourse ‘Blessed be He who grants good to those who are guilty’. The latter discourse discusses the four circumstances in which a person says the blessing ‘HaGomel’. In halachic (legal) terms, these are practical circumstances: a sick person who is healed, a captive who is released, a person who traverses the sea and one who crosses the desert. But Rabbi Joseph Isaac explains them in spiritual and moral terms, underlining the idea that, as explained in his discourse, in order to reveal the Tetragrammaton in the world, one must aspire to purity.

The sick person is one who suffers from a spiritual blockage in his mind and heart, meaning that he cannot think or feel in a wholesome spiritual way. The captive is the one trapped by his own Evil Desire. The one who traverses the sea is immersed in the confusion of the ‘many waters’ of the problems of daily life (although we are assured that these waters cannot quench the fire of his or her hidden love for G-d). The person in the desert is stranded in materialistic desires which make his life into a desert as far as sanctity is concerned.

In each case the individual is helped by G-d to master the negative situation. But his or her sense of their own possible personal flaws helps them in the quest for purity and G-dliness expressed in the final discourse ‘Lift your hands to holiness’.

In this endeavour, the first discourse, said on 12 Tammuz: ‘Hashem is among those who help me’, sets the scene. Here Rabbi Joseph Isaac explained that one has to know, first and foremost, that there is nothing apart from the Divine, and that, as Maimonides puts it: ‘The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdoms is to know that there is a First Existence which brings all else into being’. In Hebrew the initial letters of the four words beginning this phrase form the Tetragrammaton. It is G-d, the Tetragrammaton, who is All.

That knowledge inspires each individual to make their journey through life, risking the dangers described in the third discourse about HaGomel, but with the goal to achieve the indwelling of the Divine described in the final discourse.

⁸ See Moed Katan 17a (see Rashi), and Maimonides, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah, 5:???. [re Kiddush and Hillul Hashem of Sage].

We thus see the significance of the sequence of these discourses: first the emphasis that All is G-d, empowering us; then the elucidation of the possible problems; then the depiction of the spiritual goal.

In that final discourse, defining the goal of our lives in this world, the verses ‘Lift your hands to holiness and bless the Divine. G-d will bless you from Zion’ (Ps.134:2-3) are explained to mean that ultimately the essence of our soul, called ‘Zion’, is revealed, and it enables us to draw the miraculous into the natural, the transcendent bond with G-d into our day to day service. Thus our Emotions and Actions are elevated and purified, enabling us to make this physical world into a dwelling for G-dliness, a task which will reach fulfilment with the coming of the Messiah, speedily in our days.

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