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The Talmud relates that the great Sage R. Yochanan ben Zakkai wept before his death, saying: "There are two paths stretching before me, one to Gan Eden [Heaven] and one to Gehinom. I know not on which I shall be led." It goes without saying that R. Yochanan ben Zakkai was concerned as to whether he had attained a sufficient level of holiness to enter Gan Eden. Why did he voice his apprehension only on his deathbed? His spiritual status should have been an ongoing concern.

Every Jew is entrusted with a unique Divine mission that he is to accomplish during his lifetime. He is allotted a specific time in which to accomplish that task - not one day more and not one day less. When a Jew fails to make use of a day, an hour, or even a moment, in pursuit of his mission, he not only fails to achieve his fullest spiritual potential, but more importantly, he has failed - during those moments - to accomplish his entrusted task.

R. Yochanan ben Zakkai spent every moment of his life totally immersed in his mission, so much so that he simply did not have time to pause and contemplate his own spiritual level. It was only at the conclusion of his mission - just prior to his demise - that he was able to ponder his own status. The importance of absolute dedication to one's mission is also alluded to in the Torah portion of Mishpatim, wherein Scripture states: "You will serve G-d... No woman will miscarry or remain childless in your land; I will make you live out full lives."

In spiritual terms, the above verses mean that when performed with proper intent, Divine service leads to ever greater spiritual heights - it "bears children." When, however, a person is self-satisfied in his service, it fails to produce the desired results - he "miscarries" and is spiritually "barren." One can guard against this by "living out a full life." I.e., a person should realize that he is granted a specific number of years. Every moment wasted on something other than his appointed task constitutes an act of rebellion against G-d, who entrusted him with his sacred mission.

When a person realizes this, he will gladly sacrifice all sense of ego, and concentrate solely on completing his assignment. Eventually he will become so absorbed that he will even forget that it is he who is fulfilling it; the mission in general and the task at hand will fill his mind completely. When someone else inquires about such a Jew's spiritual state, he will respond: "How can I possibly think about myself when I have been granted only a limited number of days in which to fulfill my purpose in life? I must constantly be on guard to assure that not one precious moment is lost; I simply do not have time to think about my spiritual achievements!"

When a Jew attains this level of self-abnegation, G-d blesses him with "a full life"; even if there were days in which he did not fulfill his mission, or worse yet, acted in a counterproductive manner, G-d promises him that the missing days will be made up. Ultimately, all his days become whole. (From: Wellsprings, Based on Likkutei Sichos Vol. XVI pp. 271-274)

If you see the donkey of your enemy collapsing under its burden, and are inclined to desist from helping him, you shall surely help along with him (23:5) The Hebrew for "donkey," chamor, also means "material." Thus, this verse also instructs us as to the proper attitude toward the body and physicality:

"When you will see the chamor of your enemy"---initially, you will see your material self as your enemy, as something that obstructs and hinders your spiritual growth. "collapsing under its burden"---in such a state of animosity between body and soul, the body resists the Torah and its commandments, making them an unbearable burden for it.

One's first inclination may be "to desist from helping him"---to shun the body, suppress its instincts and deny it its wants. Says the Torah: "you shall surely help along with him." Aid the material self with its "burden" by training it to recognize that the Torah is the vehicle for its own refinement and elevation (Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

And these are the laws which you shall set before them (Exodus 21:1) The phrase "and these" (ve'eileh) implies that they are a continuation of what is written before. This is to teach us that just as the laws written above (the Ten Commandment) are from Sinai, these, too, are from Sinai. (Mechilta; Rashi)

Since the majority of laws set forth in the Parshah of Mishpatim are logical laws, the Torah wishes to emphasize that these, too, are divinely ordained. (The Commentaries) chabadonline.com

The concept of "despair" is given no credence in Chassidism. It is generally assumed that there exist two types of people: fatalists and activists. The fatalist maintains that things are the way they are, and that nothing that anyone does really makes a difference. So there is reason neither for exultation nor for despair (though some would say that the fatalist's state is one of perpetual despair). The activist, on the other hand, believes himself to be the master of his fate, so he exults over his achievements and despairs when things do not go the way he's planned, believing the latter to be the result of his failure to make happen what he wanted to have happened.

The Jew is neither and both. He's a fatalist in the sense that he believes that whatever transpires is the direct result of G-d's will that it should transpire. But he's also an activist: he believes that there is much he can, and must, do, and that what he does makes a difference.

Our job, and the joy and fulfillment we experience in our successes are real and true. But when we reach the limits of what we can do, that's not failure. It simply means that we have done our job, and now it's up to G-d to do His.

By Yanki Tauber; based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe- chabadonline.com

IT IS WRITTEN: "MAN GOES OUT TO HIS WORK AND TO HIS LABOR (AVODA) UNTIL EVENING." (1) EVERY SOUL IN ITS DESCENT INTO THIS MATERIAL WORLD HAS GENERAL AND PERSONAL TASKS. THIS, THEN, IS THE MEANING OF THE VERSE: MAN GOES OUT TO HIS WORK - THE SOUL "GOES OUT" FROM ITS POSITION IN THE TROVE OF SOULS, IN THE HIGHEST HEAVENS, AND DESCENDS FROM PLANE TO PLANE UNTIL IT COMES TO BE INVESTED IN A BODY AND IN THE NATURAL AND ANIMAL SOULS. THE PURPOSE OF THIS DESCENT IS "MAN TO HIS WORK" - TO HIS GENERAL TASK OF ACHIEVING DOMINANCE OF "FORM OVER MATTER" (MEANING, THE SPIRITUAL OVER THE MATERIAL), (2) TO ILLUMINATE THE WORLD WITH THE LIGHT OF TORAH AND THE CANDLE OF MITZVA. "...TO HIS LABOR REFERS TO EACH INDIVIDUAL'S PARTICULAR MISSION, FOR EVERY SOUL HAS ITS UNIQUE AVODA IN INTELLECT AND EMOTIONS ACCORDING TO ITS NATURE AND CHARACTER. (3) "...UNTIL EVENING - WHILE THERE IS STILL TIME TO ACCOMPLISH, AS IT IS WRITTEN, "TODAY, TO PERFORM THEM (THE MITZVOT)." (4) ON A MORE PROFOUND LEVEL THE VERSE MAY BE EXPLAINED AS FOLLOWS: THE VERSE REFERS TO THE ASCENT OF THE SOUL (5) IN GENERAL, ACHIEVED BY ITS PRIOR DESCENT (MAN GOES OUT) INTO THE MATERIAL WORLD: WHEN THE SOUL ASCENDS FROM ITS BEING ENCLOSED IN THE BODY IN THIS MATERIAL WORLD, THEN... ...TO HIS WORK - THE SOUL'S OCCUPATION IN THE WORLD TO COME (6) IS COMMENSURATE WITH ITS OCCUPATION IN THE MATERIAL WORLD. IF HE HAD STUDIED TORAH REGULARLY, THERE TOO (IN THE WORLD TO COME) THE SOUL IS USHERED INTO THE "TENTS OF TORAH"; ...TO HIS LABOR - IF HE PERFORMED HIS AVODA PROPERLY THEN HIS ASCENT GOES ON... ...UNTIL EREV ("EVENING") - HIGHER AND HIGHER UNTIL HE ATTAINS THE ULTIMATE DELIGHT AND AREIVUT (7) ("SWEETNESS") OF THE ESSENCE OF THE EN SOF, (8) MAY HE BE BLESSED. (FROM REBBE'S HAYOM YOM IYAR 1)

If you run your life according what makes sense to you, you will never be sure of anything. As good as the mind is at finding solutions and answers, it is even better at finding questions and doubts.

The path of Torah is to learn and to allow the Torah within you to resonate with those truths you learn, until your mind and heart and actions are guided by a voice that has no second thoughts.

Be Within, Stay Above - More meditations from the wisdom of the Rebbe