

**Pardes from Jerusalem - Weekly Parsha Podcast –
Parshat Ki Tetze**

**Cultivating closeness with the Divine through
an ongoing private conversation.**

**A teaching on the spiritual practice of cultivating closeness
with the Divine through integrating Tefilah and Talmud Torah:
talking to the Divine in your own unique and authentic way
causes the Divine in return to speak to you
in an individual and unique way as well.**

There is a teaching from the Piaseczna's *Aish Kodesh* on *Parshat Ki Tetze*, originally taught in the Warsaw Ghetto on 14 September 1940, that illuminates the practice of harmonious integration in our relationship with the Divine Presence through the learning of Torah and prayer. The Piaseczna (Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, d. 1943) bases this teaching on the first verse in the *parsha*, by which the *parsha* is named, in Deuteronomy 21:10: "When you go out to war (*ki tetze la'milchamah*) against your enemies (*al oye'veh'cha*), and HaShem your God delivers them into your hands (*u'nat'no HaShem Elohecha b'ya'deh'cha*) so that you will take captives (*v'sha'vee'ta shiv'yo*)."

The following is based on the original Hebrew and the English translation by J. Hershy Worch in his book, *Sacred Fire: Torah From the Years of Fury 1939-1942*.

We learn from the holy Rabbi, the Godly man, the great Maggid of Mezeritch, of blessed memory, (*Rabbi DovBer of Mezeritch, successor to the Ba'al Shem Tov, d. 1772*), on the verse in Psalms 110:4, "*HaShem* has sworn and will not relent, (when referring to King David) you are a *cohen* (priest) forever, for you are a king of righteousness" that *cohen* in this specific verse refers to the attribute of *chesed* – loving-kindness. Therefore, the meaning of the verse is as follows: "You are loving-kindness forever because you are a king of righteousness."

Since the commentaries believe that God is talking to King David, the basis for having to interpret the word *cohen* to mean something other than its usual translation as priest, is that King David in fact was not a *cohen*. He clearly was not from the tribe of Levi but rather from the tribe of Yehuda. Consequently, we are compelled to seek another meaning for the term *cohen* when God informs King David that he will be a *cohen* forever. In fact, in 2 Samuel 8:18, we read: "...and the sons of Dovid were *cohanim* – priests." The common understanding of the word *cohen*, when speaking about King David and then later about his sons, is one of the leader and the king – *manhig and melech* or chief ministers.

In light of this connection between *cohen*, righteousness, kindness and king/leader, the Maggid of Mezeritch further believes that since King David was a king of righteousness, this refers to him being **similar** to the priest *cohen*, whereby he was dedicated to drawing people closer to being in relationship with HaShem. Hence, in Hebrew, the word for "sacrificial offering" brought by the *cohanim* is *korban* – bringing close. And because of King David's kindness and righteousness manifesting through his inspiring people to become closer to HaShem, the Maggid teaches, God in turn allowed each one of us, in the spirit of kindness and closeness, to refer to Him in the second person when uttering a bracha, "*Baruch atah...Blessed are you...*" The Maggid concludes that this is the expression of God's kindness to us being forever, similar to King David manifesting loving kindness forever.

The ability of a Jew to address God, the King of Kings, as "You" when saying a blessing is due to the *chesed* – the loving-kindness – of God allowing us to do so. This is extraordinary and exceptional that we refer to our Creator in the second person. Surely, one would never refer to a human king or queen in the second person. However, this highlights what is most important, the closeness to God that King David experienced and taught to us, as expressed by the use of the word "You" when we speak to God.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz in his recently published commentary on Psalms, writes that the term "*malki-tzedek*" refers not only to King David as a king of righteousness but as well to the ancient King Malki Tzedek, during the time Avraham Avinu. When explaining the term "*malki-tzedek*" in Psalms 110:4, Rav Steinsaltz refers to the verse in Genesis 14:18, "And Malki Tzedek, king of Shalem, brought forth bread and wine; and he was a *cohen* – priest of God, most High." Clearly Malki Tzedek, predating even the very existence of the *cohanim* and not being a member of *Bnei Yisrael* was not a *cohen* in the usual understanding of the word. Rather this refers to him as a king of righteousness and kindness. So whether the verse in Psalms refers to King David or Malki Tzedek as *cohen*, we are sure that it means something other than its usual meaning. Hence, the interpretation as a king of righteousness, which then evolves into a person of *chesed* – loving kindness.

The Piaseczna now continues in light of the teaching from the Maggid of Mezeritch: "You" is *noche'ach*, the second person, whereas "He" is *nistar*, the third person. In Hebrew, *nistar* means "hidden." When the Men of the Great Assembly determined (in the beginning of the Second Temple period) the precise language of the prayers and blessings in which we say to God, "You," explicitly uttering God's name, they surely succeeded in bringing about an immediate revelation of God. When we utter the blessing, "Blessed are You, *Adonai*, our God....," we can actually sense that God is truly facing us. Therefore we can surely say "You," reflecting our authentic experience of closeness, consequently not rendering the blessing as having been uttered in vain. This is the very essence of closeness that the Men of the Great Assembly were channeling into the world, affording each one of us the opportunity and the consciousness to experience closeness with "our God-*Eloheinu*" within our deeper selves in an immanent way.

The Piaseczna now shares a teaching (*Tikunei Zohar 21*) that just as prayer needs learning of Torah, as it is written in Proverbs 28:9, "He who turns his ear from hearing Torah, even his prayer is an abomination," so also one's learning of Torah needs prayer. Why? We can understand this in light of what was previously taught, that when we say the blessing, "Blessed are YOU Lord who teaches Torah to His nation Israel" we begin in the second person, sensing closeness to the Almighty, but we conclude in the third person – "...who teaches Torah to His nation."

This means that the Torah that HaShem teaches to the nation, is to the general nation in its entirety, as one whole unit. This is not a teaching that is personal and individual to each person. Rather, God teaches Torah to His people in general, to all the people of Israel as one. It is therefore up to each and every individual Jew to work to achieve that experience where he or she senses that God is speaking to him/her individually. In the most of profound and intimate ways, a person can indeed sense that God is speaking to that one person alone. The Piaseczna affirms that this CAN be achieved, but only by that person's efforts alone and individually. The person must take the initiative.

And how? By what means can a person effect a transformative experience from hearing Torah in the most of general ways as a member of the nation to hearing Torah as a means by which God is speaking only and uniquely to him or her? Through prayer! This in fact is why Talmud Torah needs prayer, in order to reveal within the general teaching, in a way at a distance, a unique, intimate and close experience. For when we approach God "face to face" in the space of closeness and we say "*atah* – You," we activate a specific and unique revelation of Godliness in the most direct way possible, whereby God now speaks to the individual and teaches Torah to the person individually, also in the second person "*atah*." The Torah the person now hears within is being taught to him/her privately, intimately and subjectively.

Within this expanded consciousness, which employs both the mind/intellect and the heart/feelings, each person can grasp and understand a part of the Torah that is uniquely his or hers, in his or her way. This is because the Torah that God teaches someone individually and personally cannot be grasped by anyone else, while another person, in turn, may comprehend what the other cannot. As an educator, I refer to this as the "cosmic differentiated learning classroom."

To further this important insight, the Piaseczna shares a teaching from the *Maor V'Shemesh (Parshat V'Eirah)*, written by his namesake Rav Kalonymus Kalman HaLevi Epstein (d. 1823). The *Maor V'Shemesh* calls our attention to a verse in Psalms, 25:14, "God's secrets are with those who are in awe of Him." He then clearly states that "God's secrets" does not refer to the common understanding as the study of Kabbalah. He questions how this could be, since by now the Kabbalah is written in books, available to anyone who wants to learn it. The mystery, the *sod* – the secret, rather, is in the understanding and perception of God that each person may achieve and that no one else can acquire. That which each person perceives of God and which cannot be explained or related to someone else, comprises the real secret and the mystery.

The Piaseczna explains that this mystery and secret can indeed be revealed to a person when he prays, when he visualizes that he is literally standing before God, and he speaks to God in the second person as "YOU – *atah*." At that moment God responds by also speaking to him in return, addressing him individually, immediately and directly, as "you – *atah*."

I understand this as the cosmic relationship engaging in a private and intimate discussion, dialogue and conversation. To the degree that we *mamash* sense the Divine Presence within us and around us, enough to mindfully and with purpose refer to the Divine Presence as "YOU", to that degree the Torah we learn will be taught and then heard in the most unique, private and intimate way.

The Piaseczna then both cautions and encourages, that for this amazing experience of closeness and intimacy with HaShem to manifest, the person must reveal himself through his prayers. The person must be authentic and honest in his approach, intentionally expressing his own inner self, his own thoughts, and his own feelings in the words of prayer that he chooses when speaking with God. For the Torah that God responds with to be **uniquely his**, he must first offer in this cosmic conversation **his real inner being**. And only then, as we learn in the verse in Proverbs 27:19, "like water reflecting the face to the face," the revelation of God will be reflected in the revelation of himself that is in his prayer. Basically, the more of our unique selves that we bring to our prayer with God, to that degree, the Torah that God responds with, regardless of whatever piece of Torah we are learning, will be unique as well. As a spiritually transformative moment, we shall learn, hear and understand Torah in a different way. "See yourself in the text and see the text in you."

This is true even when a person's prayer derives from the depths of his heart due to his suffering and experiencing great distress. Because he is pouring forth his soul, and his soul is the very life force in the words of his prayer, there is in the Divine reflection an immediate and direct revelation of God's Torah for that individual.

The Piaseczna now explains the spiritual meaning of the verse he introduced in the beginning of this teaching, "When you go out to war against your enemies, God, **your** God will deliver them into your hands, so that you will take captives." The spiritual understanding of "enemies" here refers to feeling at a distance from God – far from God. He emphasizes that when we are at war, from this space of distance and disconnect, engaged in a struggle of any kind, and going to battle with forces within or around us, if you are in pain and sincerely praying from the depths of your heart, God will do this much for you: "He will put it right into your hands". What will He put right into your hands? Himself! He will be **your** God --- your unique and individual God. This direct and palpable sense of closeness with God transforms the pain and suffering in ways we can never even imagine until we are in the midst of the experience.

In fact, the Piaseczna concludes by explaining the deeper meaning of "you will take captives – *V'shavita shivyo*." These words in Hebrew also mean, "you shall return His return." In *Eicha* 5:21 we read, "Return us to You and we shall return." We are praying here for the Divine to awaken within us the desire to return. However, the Divine replies in Malachi 3:7, "Return to Me and I will return to You..." With the individual revelation achieved through personal and genuine prayer, you will actually succeed in "returning His return." That is to say, your returning to God, your cultivating the spiritual practice of *teshuva*, results in God returning to you – His doing *teshuva* to you. So in conclusion, what in fact was held captive that now becomes ours? Closeness to the Divine!!! Without this, we are compelled to go to war and fight to claim it --- through our *tefilah*.

In light of this radically amazing Torah, I invite each of you to consider cultivating two spiritual practices that may nurture your relationship with the Divine in a way where you sense a growing closeness and intimacy, in ongoing intimate and personal conversation.

1 – Following a moment of contemplation in silence, speak to the Divine Presence within you, the *Shechinah*. Engage your authentic and genuine outpouring of your heart, without judgment. Allow this to be spontaneous and uncontrived. Allow yourselves to talk with the Divine in the second person, "You." This is equally so whether you pray from a *siddur* – prayer book – and/or whether you utter your own particular prayers. May they not merely be reciting someone else's words.

2 – Each time you learn a new piece of Torah, of any kind, strive to find you in the text **and** the text in you. Speak to God, again in the second person, seeking your own individualized and personalized understanding of the text. Ask that this piece of Torah becomes yours --- in a deep, intimate and personal way.

May we all merit to do exactly this! Shabbat Shalom U'mevorach.