

Dvar Torah: Yom Kippur

by Meron Persey - Wednesday, October 02, 2019

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What is more important? Our lives or the performance of mitzvot?

The answer, according to our sages, comes in the Torah reading from the afternoon of Yom Hakippurim. It comes from parshat Achrei-mot, in the book of Vayikra, where the Torah tells us “asher Ya’aseh otam hadam, v’chai bahem – you must perform mitzvot in order to live through them.” So chazal tell us that if, through the performance of a mitzvah, you might (God forbid) lose your life – life is sacred and must come first – with the exception of the three cardinal sins.

So here the Torah underlines for us the critical value of life and that is why, when it comes to considerations such as Shabbat, Yom Tov and Kashrut - life must always come first.

In the targum Unkulus, the Aramaic translation of the Torah, Unkulus translates the words “V’chai bahem” – to be “v’yachai bachon chayei alma” – “in order that you will live, through them, an eternal existence” Unkulus tells us that by performing mitzvot we will merit to live forever – the soul will continue to live well beyond our physical lives here on earth. Therefore “v’chai bahem,” according to Unkulus, is a statement which refers not to this world but rather to the world to come. And as a result, we learn that by committing ourselves to torah and mitzvot, with a healthy relationship between ourselves and our creator; and between ourselves and our fellow human beings we will be investing in eternal life.

The Chiddushei Harim comes up with a great peirush, something very different. He says “v’chai bahem” means: ‘get a life through them’. Through the performance of mitzvot, have an exciting, exhilarating and marvellous life. Mitzvot are not given to us in order to dampen our spirit, to make life difficult – sure enough they are challenging and not always easy – but ultimately, they enhance the experience. They give us meaning. They give us a sense of fulfilment. They add simcha, true joy, to our very existence.

Over Yom Hakippurim we will be praying to God, “Zochreinu L’chaim” – “remember us for life”. So let us bear in mind these three peirushim.

First, when it comes to the fast of Yom Kippur we need to look after our lives. If there is even the tiniest hint that by fasting we could be endangering ourselves, we must eat.

Second, let’s remember the peirush of Unkulus, calling upon us to be committed to the performance of mitzvot, in order please God, to invest in ‘chayei alma’ – ‘everlasting life’.

And third, let’s not forget that beautiful peirush of the Chiddushei Harim, whereby, through the performance of mitzvot, we will be investing in a life of great excitement, of novelty, of wonderful meaning and fulfilment.

V’chai bahem – thanks to the torah and mitzvot we can have the best of lives in this world,

May Hashem indeed answer all of our prayers and bless us with a wonderful, new, happy and fulfilling year ahead,

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I wish you all Shabbat shalom and chatima tova. const overlayTranslations =
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