

ROSH HASHANAH

תשפ"ז

Ashkenazim began Selichos on Motzei Shabbos. 5,787 years ago, Hakodosh Boruch Hu said "Yehi Or." He created all the raw material in the universe, however you understand it – electrons, protons, whatever the latest scientists are saying – all the raw material. For six days He shaped and formed it, until "va'yechulu hashomayim veho'oretz": we have the world we have today.

On the sixth day He created Odom HoRishon and gave him an unbelievable opportunity. He put him in Gan Eden. He did not have to worry about anything; everything was taken care of. "Le'ovdoh u'leshomroh," Rabbi Elazar says, did not mean physical work; it meant avodas Hashem. Life was perfect. You just had to serve Hakodosh Boruch Hu.

He gave him one commandment: **מִכָּל עֵץ הָעֵדֶן אָכַל תֹּאכַל וּמִעֵץ הָדֶעֶת טוֹב וְרָע לֹא תֹאכַל מִקִּדּוֹ.** And he could not stand up to the challenge. The first time Hakodosh Boruch Hu had to execute din in this world was on Rosh Hashanah, 5,787 years ago.

Absolute Authority and the Yetzer Horo of Hefker

There is a basic contradiction in the human being. Odom HoRishon knew very well that he was created yesh me'ayin and formed from the dust of the earth. He knew there was an absolute Authority making absolute demands on him. On the other hand, every human being wants hefker. The biggest yetzer horo in the world is hefker: I want no limitations. I want everything.

And when you want everything, you wind up losing everything you had before. The Gemara asks: **הָמֵן מִן הַתּוֹרָה מֵבִין? הָמֵן הָעֵץ.**

Homon made the same mistake that Odom HoRishon made. Homon had everything: enormous wealth, 127 provinces, everybody bowing down to him. Homon had everything, with one thing he could not have. There was one Jew who would not bow down, and he could not tolerate it. Odom HoRishon had everything in Gan Eden, with one thing he could not have. The demand was the same: accept a limitation. And they could not do it.

That is the contradiction we have to confront when we approach the Yom HaDin. Those of us who grew up many years ago remember something very different from today. When I was a little boy, most of the people who davened in my shul were Europeans. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, even among people who were barely shomer Torah u'mitzvos, there was a palpable fear. You could feel it.

Why? I had four grandparents. My father's father grew up in Romania under Emperor Franz Joseph. He always talked about his Emperor Franz Joseph. He happened to like Jews, but he was an emperor: there was an absolute authority above you. My other three grandparents grew up in Russia under the Czar, who hated Jews. They also grew up knowing that there was an absolute authority, and they lived with that reality every day. So when you came to Yom HaDin and spoke about Hakodosh Boruch Hu as the absolute Authority, the concept itself was real to them.

Nowadays, if you grow up in the Western world, you do not have that experience. In the United States no one can take Donald Trump as an absolute authority; in a democracy the whole system is built so that nobody has absolute authority. If you live in Russia, you know Putin is an authority. In Iran, whoever is running it is an authority. But in the Western world we grow up without an intrinsic feeling of absolute authority, and that affects everything – parent-child relationships,

school authority, every kind of authority.

We begin the day with Adon Olam. 'Adon' means He runs everything in this world. Translating that into our lives is a much bigger avodoh today, precisely because the idea of absolute authority is foreign to us. The same is true of din. In the contemporary world, you can watch a terrible crime go to trial and have no idea whether there will be real justice. So the idea that there is an absolute Authority, that there is a din, and that we are going to confront Hakodosh Boruch Hu is a much bigger avodoh than it may once have been. But that does not mean we do not have to do it.

Knowing Who Runs the World

One of the reasons we decided this year to learn Rabbeinu Avrohom ben HoRambam's chapter on bitochon is that he explains in great detail how Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs this world down to the last detail. Internalizing that is an absolute obligation.

The Rambam begins Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah:

יְסוּד הַיְסוּדוֹת וְעוֹמֵד הַחֲכָמוֹת לִידַע שְׁיֵשׁ שָׁם קִצּוֹי רָאוּשׁוֹן, וְהוּא מְקַיֵּי כָל נִמְצָא.

That is the foundation of everything in life and of understanding anything in this world. Hakodosh Boruch Hu is the foundation of all existence.

וְכָל הַנִּמְצָאִים מִשְׁמַיִם וְאֶרֶץ וְמֵאֲשֵׁרֵיהֶם לֹא נִמְצָאוּ אֶלָּא מֵאֲמִתּוֹת הַקִּיצָאוֹ.

Whatever exists is here because He gives it existence.

But He is not merely the source of existence. He is Elokei ha'olam, Adon kol ha'aretz. He runs this world down to the finest detail. We begin davening with Adon Olam and finish with Aleinu: la'Adon hakol, losais geduloh l'Yotzer Bereishis. He created the entire process of Bereishis and He continues to run it.

ה' הוּא הַאֱלֹהִים בְּשֵׁמִים מְמַעַל וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מְתַחַת אֵין עוֹד.

There is no other independent force or power in this world.

It is not like the head of a corporation who delegates. There is no delegation. Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs anything and everything in this world.

The Rambam then says that we have a mitzvah l'ahavo ul'yiroh mimenu. That means the chiyuv is not to think of Hakodosh Boruch Hu as some far-off concept, hidden somewhere beyond the universe. We are supposed to have an active relationship with Him, based on ahavoh and yiroh.

How do we get there?

וְהִיאֵךְ הִיא הַדֶּרֶךְ לְאַהֲבָתוֹ וְיִרְאָתוֹ

The Rambam says that a person contemplates Hakodosh Boruch Hu's works and creations. People misunderstand this Rambam. They think the Rambam is saying that everybody has to become involved in all sorts of philosophy or Kabbalah. But at the end of perek dalet he says very clearly that the matters he has been describing are 'Pardes', and not everybody belongs there.

There were arba'ah nichnesu laPardes – four enormous talmidei chachamim who tried to master this esoteric knowledge – and not all of them had the capacity to grasp these matters properly. The Rambam says:

וְאִנִּי אוֹמֵר שֶׁאֵין רֹאֵי לִטִּיל בִּפְרִדָּס אֲלֵא מִי שֶׁנִּתְמַלֵּא כְרִסוֹ לָחֶם וּבָשָׂר.

Who is capable of entering the esoteric areas of kabbalah and speculation – only someone who has filled his stomach with bread and meat. What is "bread and meat"? Knowing shas and poskim – knowing what is permitted and forbidden – issur v'heter and the other mitzvos – what Chazal call havayos d'Abaye v'Rava.

For everybody in this room, the Rambam is saying: forget about Kabbalah for now. That may come at the end for certain unique individuals. We have to begin with havayos d'Abaye v'Rava.

וְאִם עַל פִּי כֵן רֹאִיוִין הֵן לְהַקְדִּימוֹ, שֶׁהֵן מְיֻשְׁבִין דַּעְתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם תְּחִלָּה.

If you want to orient your mind, learn how to think, and understand what is happening in this world, you begin with Shas. And through that Torah you merit Olam Haboh.

So the Rambam is telling us: how do I get to ahavoh and yiroh? Learn Berochos, Shabbos, Eruvin, Pesachim, Bava Kamma, Bava Metzia, Bava Basra. That is where we begin. But how does learning those things change a human being?

Torah Changes a Person

At the end of Hilchos Mikvaos, the Rambam explains it. I quote this Rambam all the time because it is a basic principle.

דָּבָר בְּרוּר וְגִלּוֹי שֶׁהִטְמָאוֹת וְהִטְהָרוֹת גְּזוּרוֹת הַכְּתוּב הֵן, וְאִין מִדְּבָרִים שֶׁדַּעְתוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מְכַרְעָתוֹ... וְאִם עַל פִּי כֵן רָמַז יֵשׁ בְּדָבָר: כָּשֶׁם שֶׁהִמְכֵּן לְבֹ לְטָהָר, כִּיִּן שֶׁטָּבַל טָהוֹר, וְאִם עַל פִּי שֶׁלֹּא נִתְחַדֵּשׁ בְּגוּפוֹ דָּבָר – כִּךְ הִמְכֵּן לְבֹ לְטָהָר נִפְשׁוֹ מִטְמָאוֹת הַנִּפְשׁוֹת... וְהִבִּיא נִפְשׁוֹ בְּמִי הַדַּעַת – טָהוֹר.

Tumah and taharoh are a Divine decree – a gezeiras hakosuv. Tumah is not dirt that you wash off with water. But the Rambam says there is a lesson here: if a person wants to become tahor, the first thing is intention. If I want to use the mikvah to enter the world of kedushoh, I need kavanah taharoh. I have to want to make myself tahor.

The same thing is true spiritually. If I want to purify my neshomo from wrong thoughts and wrong middos, I first have to decide that I want to become a different person. Then I immerse my neshomo in mei hada'as hatahor – the waters of Torah – and the Torah changes me.

There is a Gemara in Berochos with the same image:

מִה נִחְלִים מַעְלִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִטּוֹמְאָה לְטָהָרָה, אִם אֵהֱלִים מַעְלִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִכַּף חוֹבָה לְכַף זְכוּת.

Torah can raise a person from one state to another.

If I want Torah to change me as a human being, I have to immerse myself in Torah with the attitude: I want to become a different human being. I want to become close to Hakodosh Boruch Hu. I want to become a kodosh.

Kedushoh Means Taking Reality Seriously

The idea of 'kodosh' sounds strange to people. Kodosh means that I recognize a dimension of the universe beyond the physical. I recognize that Hakodosh Boruch Hu is beyond the physical, and I recognize that I am not merely a body. I am a body and a neshomo.

That is how we begin every morning. First we thank Hakodosh Boruch Hu in Asher Yotzar because the body functions. Then we say:

אֵלֶּכִי, נִשְׁמָה שֶׁנִּתְּתָּ בִּי טָהוֹרָה הִיא. אֲתָה בְּרָאתָה, אֲתָה יָצַרְתָּה, אֲתָה נִפְחַתָּה בִּי, וְאֲתָה מְשַׁמְרָה בְּקִרְבִּי.

The body is not the whole story. I have to recognize who and what I am.

Growing up as a regular Orthodox Jewish kid in America, you may never have thought very much about that. Who am I? I am a neshomo. I have the potential to connect to Hakodosh Boruch Hu and become a kodosh.

People come to Eretz Yisroel. Why? Because it is a mokom kodosh. If a person recognizes kedushas ho'oretz and says, "This is an opportunity for me to connect to Hakodosh Boruch Hu on a higher level than I can elsewhere," then he is using the kedushoh of Eretz Yisroel.

The same thing applies to a beis midrash. There is kedushas beis hamidrash. Sometimes I see someone wander in from the dormitory looking like he just fell out of bed – his shirt out, wearing slippers. You are walking into a mokom kodosh. If you are English, would you walk into Buckingham Palace that way? If you are American, would you walk into the White House that way? No. You respect the place. You have to recognize that this is a mokom kodosh, in order to use it as a mokom kodosh.

For many years there was something I did not understand. Throughout the history of Klal Yisroel, after a tragedy gedolei talmidei chachomim tried to confront what had happened and ask what the aveiroh was. In 1648-1649, Tach v'Tat, communities in Poland and Ukraine were devastated. The death toll was between one and two million Jews. The Tosafos Yom Tov attributed the tragedy to talking devorim beteilim in shul. At first glance that sounds very strange. Such a catastrophe because people talked in shul?

But he was saying something much deeper. If you walk into a shul and talk devorim beteilim, you do not appreciate kedushas hamokom. You do not appreciate what it means to live in the presence of Hakodosh Boruch Hu.

When you walk into a shul or a beis midrash and realize where you are, you act differently. When you come to a beis midrash in Eretz Yisroel and appreciate what it is, it is a whole different world. As the Rambam says, it can change you – if you take that attitude seriously and want to become a kodosh. But if Eretz Yisroel is just another place, and the great advantage is that there are "yeshivish bars" where you can get drunk, then you have completely missed what Eretz Yisroel is. You have taken an opportunity for kedushoh and treated it as hefker.

Teshuvoh Begins by Confronting Reality

What do we say every day? Atoh chonein l'odom da'as. The first thing we ask Hakodosh Boruch Hu for in Shemoneh Esrei is da'as. Chazal say that without da'as, nothing is worth anything. And immediately after asking for da'as, what do we say?

הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ אֲבִינוּ לְתוֹרָתְךָ, וְקִרְבָּנוּ מִלִּקְנוּ לְעִבּוּדֶךָ, וְהִחְזִירֵנוּ בְּתִשְׁבָּה שְׁלָמָה לְפָנֶיךָ.

There are three levels here: Teshuvoh begins with confronting reality and taking responsibility. The reality is that we live in a world that Hakodosh Boruch Hu runs completely. He gave us an opportunity to connect to Him through Torah.

How do you connect to Hakodosh Boruch Hu? He is beyond this world. So He gave us the Torah – the wisdom of Hakodosh Boruch Hu that this world is capable of containing. When we learn Torah properly, we shape our own minds according to Hakodosh Boruch Hu's wisdom. That is the connection.

And it has to be approached with that attitude. Hashiveinu Ovinu does not say simply "return us to Torah." It says l'Torasecha – to Your Torah. Every day we say v'ha'er eineinu b'Torasecha – Your Torah. If I approach Torah as Hakodosh Boruch Hu's chochmah, it changes the way I learn and it changes what the learning does to me.

The Opportunity of Our Generation

Hakodosh Boruch Hu has given our generation a tremendous opportunity. After the Second World War there was a churbon; the Torah world was devastated. And in His infinite wisdom, Hakodosh Boruch Hu planted the seeds of rebirth at the time of the churbon. Eighty years later there is a growth and availability of Torah on a scale that has not existed for a very long time.

That is not a surprise. The Midrash connects the beginning of Bereishis with Torah and the coming of Moshiach:

וְהָאֶרֶץ הַיְּתֵדָה תִּהְיֶה וְנִבְהוּ וְחֻשָּׁן... וְרוּחַ אֱלֹקִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם... יְהִי אוֹר.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu creates a situation for the coming of Moshiach through an unbelievable spread of Torah throughout the world.

The Gra said that Moshiach will come only after Torah spreads throughout the world and then returns to Eretz Yisroel. He said that the last place Torah would have to spread before coming back to Eretz Yisroel was America. Remember when the Gra lived: America was almost nothing. Yet over the past eighty years we have watched Torah spread enormously in America and then return to Eretz Yisroel.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu is setting us up for the final geuloh. The United Nations may be one of the most useless organizations in human history, but it accomplished one worthwhile thing: in 1947 it voted for the establishment of the State of Israel. And what has that ultimately made possible? Eretz Yisroel today is the major center of limud haTorah in the world.

אֵין לוֹ לְהַקְדֹּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא גְעוּלָמוֹ אֲלֵא אַרְבַּע אֲמוֹת שֶׁל הַלֵּכָה בְּלֵבָד.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu does everything in this world so that Klal Yisroel can learn Torah. If you want to understand why there was a State of Israel, the result we can see today is that we are able to learn Torah here in Eretz Yisroel on an extraordinary scale.

The Torah says:

וְהָיָה כִּי תִמְצֵאן אֹתוֹ רַעוּת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת... כִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי זִכְרוֹ.

Torah will never be forgotten. At one point it will spread again.

We live in an incredible period in history. Hakodosh Boruch Hu has made it extraordinarily easy to connect to Him – if we want to take advantage of the opportunity.

We say every day: v'ha'er eineinu b'Torasecha. Once you connect to Torah in a deep way, then v'dabek libeinu b'mitzvosecha. Our avodas Hashem becomes different. And then v'yached levaveinu l'ahavoh ul'yiroh es Shemecho – then we can have the proper ahavoh and yiroh.

That is how we bring Moshiach. Hakodosh Boruch Hu prepares the world, but it is up to us to respond. We bring the bi'as hagoel by connecting to Him through His Torah.

Selichos: Life Is Serious

We are beginning Selichos. Selichos means that we begin by recognizing reality: there is an absolute Authority, Hakodosh Boruch Hu. He runs this world. There is a din. Everything we do has consequences.

There is no such thing as stam doing something and having no consequence. If you learned Nefesh HaChaim, you know that everything I do here in the physical world has an unbelievable result in the spiritual realms and an influence that comes back down into this world. As we confront the Yom HaDin, we have to understand that life is serious.

Hakodosh Boruch Hu has also given us an incredible opportunity. It is not an opportunity that existed fifty years ago, a hundred years ago, or two hundred years ago. He has given our generation the ability to learn Torah on an extraordinary scale and to connect to Him through that Torah. That is part of His preparation for the coming of Moshiach.

But it is up to us to use it.