A SPECIAL YUD TES KISLEV EDITION

י״ט כסלו



A Son Who Thinks He Is a Stranger

יוסף ה׳ לי בן אחר

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There are two boros in the life of Yosef HaTzaddik.

The first is the bor into which his brothers threw him. The Torah tells us, וְהַבּוֹר רֵק אֵין בּוֹ מָיִם, that the pit was empty and there was no water in it. We can only imagine what Yosef must have experienced sitting at the bottom of that bor, knowing that it was his own brothers who had put him there.

Years later, after having been sold into slavery and falsely accused by the wife of Potiphar, Yosef finds himself in an Egyptian prison. In speaking to the Sar HaMashkim, Yosef describes his circumstances:

> כִּי גֻנֹּב גֻּנַּבְתִּי מֵאֶרֶץ הָעִבְרִים וְגַם פֹּה לֹא עָשִׂיתִי מְאוּמָה כִּי שָׂמוּ אֹתִי בַּבּוֹר.

I was stolen from the land of the Hebrews, and here too I have done nothing for which they have placed me in the bor. (Bereishis 40:15)

When Pharaoh finally summons Yosef, the Torah once again describes the prison as a bor.

> וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיְרִיצֻהוּ מִן הַבּוֹר.

Rashi explains that the prison was constructed in the form of a pit. But throughout the parsha the Torah refers to the prison as the Beis HaSohar. Why, at these particular moments in Yosef's life, does the Torah choose to describe it as a bor? What is the relationship between these two boros?

To understand the significance of the two boros of Yosef HaTzaddik, we need to learn a remarkable series of Gemaras about the life of Rabbi Meir.

The Rebbe Who Pushed Away His Talmid

The Arizal teaches us that the primary nitzotz of the neshamah of Elisha HaNavi came from Yosef HaTzaddik.

Elisha had a talmid by the name of Geichazi. When Naaman, the commander of the army of Aram, was afflicted with tzaraas, he came to Elisha HaNavi, who instructed him to immerse himself seven times in the Yarden. Having been miraculously healed, Naaman recognized the greatness of Hashem and wished to give Elisha gifts. Elisha refused to accept them.

Geichazi saw an opportunity to enrich himself. Unbeknownst to his Rebbe, he pursued Naaman and fabricated a story that Elisha had changed his mind. Naaman gave him two talents of silver and two sets of clothing, which Geichazi subsequently hid. When Elisha confronted him, Geichazi lied about where he had been.

Elisha told Geichazi that the tzaraas of Naaman would now cling to him and his descendants forever.

As egregious as the behavior of Geichazi was, Chazal are critical of the manner in which Elisha responded.

> לְעוֹלָם תְּהֵא שְׂמֹאל דּוֹחָה וְיָמִין מְקָרֶבֶת, לֹא כֶּאֱלִישָׁע שֶׁדְּחָפוֹ לְגֵיחֲזִי בִּשְׁתֵּי יָדָיו.

One should always push away with the left hand and draw close with the right hand, unlike Elisha, who pushed Geichazi away with both hands. (Sotah 47a)

Elisha eventually traveled to Damascus in an effort to bring Geichazi back to teshuvah. Geichazi refused. He had learned from Elisha himself that one who sins and causes others to sin is not afforded the opportunity to do teshuvah.

Imagine the pain of Elisha HaNavi hearing his own Torah quoted back to him by a talmid as the reason that he could never return.

The Gemara goes so far as to tell us that one of the illnesses from which Elisha suffered was a consequence of having pushed Geichazi away with both hands.

The Megaleh Amukos (Va'eschanan, Ofan 217) reveals to us a fascinating dimension of this story. Geichazi would return to this world as Elisha ben Avuyah. He bore the name Elisha because Elisha HaNavi bore some responsibility for his spiritual downfall.

Generations later there would be another Elisha, but this time there would be a talmid who would refuse to push his Rebbe away.

The Making of an Acher

Elisha ben Avuyah was one of the great Tannaim of his generation. The Gemara in Chagigah (14b) tells us that he was one of the four who entered the Pardes. Having seen the malach Metatron sitting in Shamayim, Elisha mistakenly concluded that there were two independent powers governing the world.

Elisha heard a bas kol emanating from Shamayim.

> שׁוּבוּ בָנִים שׁוֹבָבִים חוּץ מֵאַחֵר.

Return, wayward children, with the exception of Acher.

Elisha came to the conclusion that if he had already forfeited his portion in Olam Haba, he might as well enjoy Olam Hazeh. When he approached a zonah, she was shocked. Was this really the great Elisha ben Avuyah? To demonstrate to her that he was no longer the man she remembered, Elisha uprooted a radish on Shabbos.

אחר הוא — this is someone else, she said.

And so Elisha ben Avuyah became known as Acher.

There is something particularly painful about the name Acher. A person can live with the knowledge that he has done something terribly wrong and still believe that he is capable of doing teshuvah. What happens when he comes to believe that the person who was once capable of living a life of kedushah no longer exists?

How many of us, having disappointed ourselves enough times, have quietly come to a similar conclusion about ourselves? There was a time when we had certain aspirations in our Avodas Hashem. At some point we began to feel almost foolish for having them. We remember who we once wanted to be and have convinced ourselves that we know better now.

For Elisha, the bas kol confirmed what he had come to believe about himself. He was an Acher.

Rabbi Meir and Bruriah

In order to understand the relationship between Rabbi Meir and his Rebbe, we need to understand something about Rabbi Meir himself.

The Gemara in Berachos (10a) tells us that Rabbi Meir had neighbors whose behavior caused him considerable distress. Rabbi Meir began to daven that they should die.

His wife Bruriah challenged him on the basis of a passuk in Tehillim.

> יִתַּמּוּ חַטָּאִים מִן הָאָרֶץ וּרְשָׁעִים עוֹד אֵינָם.

Dovid HaMelech was davening for the cessation of sin. If these people were to do teshuvah, there would no longer be reshaim. Why was Rabbi Meir davening for their death when he could be davening for their teshuvah?

Rabbi Meir accepted the words of his wife, davened for his neighbors, and indeed they did teshuvah.

Bruriah is a lashon of birur. She had the capacity to distinguish between the person and the aveirah that he had committed. And I think that Bruriah understood something about her husband. Beyond the inherent correctness of her interpretation of the passuk, she was reminding Rabbi Meir of his own Torah.

The Gemara in Kiddushin (36a) records a fundamental machlokes between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Meir concerning the nature of our relationship with Hashem.

Rabbi Yehudah maintains:

> בזמן שאתם נוהגים מנהג בנים אתם קרוים בנים.

When you conduct yourselves as children, you are called children.

Rabbi Meir disagrees:

> בין כך ובין כך אתם קרוים בנים.

Regardless of how you conduct yourselves, you are still called children.

Rabbi Meir brings a series of pesukim demonstrating that even when Klal Yisrael behaves in a manner that is completely inconsistent with what it means to be a child of Hashem, we retain our status as His children.

According to Rabbi Meir, there is a dimension of our relationship with Hashem that our behavior cannot touch.

Bruriah knew that her husband, of all people, was capable of seeing something in these neighbors beyond the pain that they had caused him.

It was with these very eyes that Rabbi Meir looked at Elisha ben Avuyah.

A Shabbos Afternoon in Teveriah

The Yerushalmi in Chagigah (2:1) tells us that one Shabbos, Rabbi Meir was delivering a shiur in the Beis Medrash in Teveriah when he was informed that his Rebbe was riding past on a horse.

> פסק ליה מן דרשה ונפק לגביה.

Rabbi Meir interrupted his shiur and went outside to his Rebbe.

The Bavli in Chagigah (15a) describes Rabbi Meir walking behind the horse of Elisha ben Avuyah on Shabbos, learning Torah from him.

At a certain point, Elisha turned to Rabbi Meir and told him that he could go no further. They had reached the techum Shabbos. Elisha had been calculating the distance based on the steps of his horse.

Rabbi Meir responded:

> אף אתה חזור בך.

You too should return.

Elisha explained that he had already heard the bas kol declaring that everyone could return with the exception of Acher.

What did Rabbi Meir see at that particular moment that prompted him to encourage his Rebbe to do teshuvah?

Here was a man who was openly being mechalel Shabbos and yet, as he rode his horse, he was sufficiently concerned with the kedushah of his talmid's Shabbos that he had been counting the steps of the horse.

Why did it matter to Elisha whether or not Rabbi Meir crossed the techum?

Rabbi Meir recognized his Rebbe in those words. The very same Elisha who had once taught him hilchos Shabbos was still concerned that his talmid should observe them. Whatever had happened to Elisha since he entered the Pardes, there was something of the Elisha that Rabbi Meir knew and loved that was still very much alive.

Rabbi Meir was living his own Torah of בין כך ובין כך אתם קרוים בנים.

When Elisha insisted that the bas kol had excluded him from doing teshuvah, Rabbi Meir brought him into thirteen different Batei Midrash. In each Beis Medrash they asked a child to recite the passuk that he had been learning. Time and again, the passuk seemed to confirm Elisha's worst fears.

In the final Beis Medrash, a child recited the passuk:

> וְלָרָשָׁע אָמַר אֱלֹקִים מַה לְּךָ לְסַפֵּר חֻקָּי.

Hashem says to the rasha: What right do you have to speak of My Torah?

The child had a speech impediment, and to Elisha it sounded as though the child had said ולאלישע אמר אלקים — Hashem was speaking directly to Elisha.

One wonders what was going through the mind of Rabbi Meir as he walked from one Beis Medrash to the next. How many times could he hear what appeared to be a confirmation from Shamayim that his Rebbe was beyond redemption and still try another Beis Medrash?

If we bear in mind the words of the Megaleh Amukos, the significance of this entire episode becomes apparent. Elisha HaNavi had pushed Geichazi away with both hands. Geichazi had returned to this world as Elisha ben Avuyah and now found himself in much the same predicament, convinced once again that teshuvah was beyond his reach.

This time, there was a Rabbi Meir in his life.

The Torah Within Elisha

The Yerushalmi tells us that Rabbi Meir was once asked whom he would save first when he arrived in Olam Haba, his father or his Rebbe.

Rabbi Meir responded that he would first save his Rebbe and then his father.

When asked if he was capable of accomplishing such a thing, Rabbi Meir responded with a Mishnah in Shabbos (16:1).

מצילין תיק הספר עם הספר ותיק תפילין עם התפילין.

In the event of a fire on Shabbos, one is permitted to rescue the covering of a Sefer Torah together with the Sefer Torah and the covering of the tefillin together with the tefillin.

Rabbi Meir maintained that the very same principle applied to Elisha ben Avuyah. He could be saved in the zechus of the Torah that he carried within him.

Consider the implications of this extraordinary statement. Elisha had committed terrible aveiros and had publicly abandoned the very Torah that he had once taught. And yet, as far as Rabbi Meir was concerned, there was still a Sefer Torah inside of Elisha that needed to be rescued.

Towards the end of Elisha's life, the Yerushalmi tells us that people came to Rabbi Meir and said:

הָא רַבָּךְ בָּאִישׁ.

Your Rebbe is ill.

Even the people who came to inform Rabbi Meir of Elisha's illness knew that as far as Rabbi Meir was concerned, Elisha was still his Rebbe.

Rabbi Meir went to visit Elisha and once again encouraged him to do teshuvah.

Elisha asked him whether someone like himself could still be accepted.

Rabbi Meir responded with the passuk in Tehillim (90:3):

תָּשֵׁב אֱנוֹשׁ עַד דַּכָּא.

A person can do teshuvah until the very last moments of his life.

באותה שעה בכה אלישע ונפטר.

At that moment Elisha cried and passed away.

וְהָיָה רַבִּי מֵאִיר שָׂמֵחַ בְּלִבּוֹ וְאוֹמֵר, דּוֹמֶה שֶׁמִּתּוֹךְ תְּשׁוּבָה נִפְטַר רַבִּי.

Rabbi Meir rejoiced in his heart and said, "It appears that my Rebbe passed away having done teshuvah."

How many years had Rabbi Meir invested in Elisha ben Avuyah for the sake of those few tears?

We often measure the success of our efforts with another person by the changes that we can see in his life. For much of Elisha's life, Rabbi Meir had very little to show for his efforts. Elisha continued to live as an Acher. I wonder if Rabbi Meir himself knew how

much it meant to Elisha that somewhere in this world there was still a person who called him Rebbe.

And even after the petirah of Elisha, Rabbi Meir continued to fight for him.

The Yerushalmi tells us that a fire descended from Shamayim and began burning the kever of Elisha ben Avuyah. When Rabbi Meir was informed, he went to the kever of his Rebbe, removed his cloak and spread it over the grave. He invoked the words of Boaz to Rus:

> אִם יִגְאָלֵךְ טוֹב יִגְאָל וְאִם לֹא יַחְפֹּץ לְגָאֳלֵךְ וּגְאַלְתִּיךְ אָנֹכִי חַי ה׳.

If Hashem will redeem you, let Him redeem you. And if He does not wish to redeem you, I will redeem you myself.

The Bavli in Chagigah (15b) tells us that upon the petirah of Elisha ben Avuyah, there was a dilemma in Shamayim. In the zechus of the Torah that he had learned he could not be sentenced to Gehinnom, but because of the aveiros he had committed he could not enter Olam Haba.

Even in death, Elisha found himself without a place to belong.

Rabbi Meir declared:

> מוטב דלידייניה וליתי לעלמא דאתי.

Better that he undergo judgment and ultimately enter Olam Haba.

Rabbi Meir said that when he himself passed away he would see to it that Elisha would undergo the necessary purification. Indeed, upon the petirah of Rabbi Meir, smoke began rising from the kever of Elisha ben Avuyah.

Rabbi Meir was willing to see his Rebbe undergo the painful process of being held accountable for his aveiros. To love another Jew does not mean that we are oblivious to the things that he has done wrong. In fact, it was precisely because Rabbi Meir loved his Rebbe that he could not bear the thought of Elisha remaining in that state for eternity.

Meir, My Son

There is one final Gemara about Rabbi Meir that is particularly moving in light of everything we have learned.

Rabbah bar Shila encountered Eliyahu HaNavi and asked him what Hashem was doing.

Eliyahu responded that Hashem was quoting Torah in the names of the Chachamim but was not quoting Torah in the name of Rabbi Meir.

Why?

Because Rabbi Meir had learned Torah from Acher.

Rabbah bar Shila defended Rabbi Meir.

> רבי מאיר רימון מצא, תוכו אכל, קליפתו זרק.

Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate, ate its interior and discarded its peel.

There was Torah to be learned from Elisha ben Avuyah, and Rabbi Meir was capable of being mevarer that Torah from the behavior of his Rebbe.

Eliyahu HaNavi responded that Hashem was now quoting Torah in the name of Rabbi Meir.

But look at the words that Hashem uses to introduce the Torah of Rabbi Meir.

> מאיר בני אומר.

My son Meir says.

The very Rabbi Meir who maintained that no matter how a Jew behaves he is still called a child of Hashem, and whose commitment to that Torah had brought him into question in Shamayim itself, was now being referred to by Hashem as בני, My son.

And what was the Torah of Rabbi Meir that Hashem chose to quote?

Rabbi Meir teaches that when a person experiences pain, the Shechinah itself expresses pain.

A father feels the pain of his child. Even a child whose suffering is a consequence of his own decisions. Rabbi Meir had spent years feeling the pain of a Jew who believed that Hashem no longer considered him His child, and now Hashem Himself was quoting the Torah of Rabbi Meir that speaks to that very reality.

From an Acher to a Ben

We can now return to Yosef HaTzaddik.

When Rachel Imeinu gave birth to Yosef, she explained the significance of his name.

> וַתִּקְרָא אֶת שְׁמוֹ יוֹסֵף לֵאמֹר יֹסֵף ה' לִי בֵּן אַחֵר.

May Hashem grant me another son. (Bereishis 30:24)

The Tzemach Tzedek explains that the avodah of Yosef HaTzaddik is to take an Acher and make him into a Ben.

There are Jews who have come to feel like an Acher. Sometimes it is because of the things they have done in their lives. Sometimes it is because of the manner in which they have

been treated by other Jews. Often enough it is a combination of the two. Yosef has the capacity to restore to such a Jew the awareness that he is a Ben.

Bearing in mind the words of the Arizal that the primary nitzotz of Elisha HaNavi was that of Yosef HaTzaddik, we can begin to appreciate the depth of the entire story.

It was the particular avodah of Elisha HaNavi, as someone who carried within him the nitzotz of Yosef HaTzaddik, to bring an Acher back into the fold. Geichazi was a talmid who desperately needed that dimension of his Rebbe. Having been pushed away with both hands, he would ultimately return to this world as the Tanna who would actually come to be known as Acher.

Who would finally accomplish the avodah of Yosef HaTzaddik with Elisha ben Avuyah?

Look carefully at the bracha that Yaakov Avinu gives to Yosef.

> מִשָּׁם רֹעֶה אֶבֶן יִשְׂרָאֵל.

The roshei teivos of these four words spell מאיר.

Embedded in the bracha of Yosef HaTzaddik is the name of the Tanna who would devote so much of his life to bringing Acher back to being a Ben.

The Two Boros

When the brothers of Yosef HaTzaddik found themselves in distress in Mitzrayim, they began to reflect on what they had done to their brother so many years earlier.

> אֲבָל אֲשֵׁמִים אֲנַחְנוּ עַל אָחִינוּ אֲשֶׁר רָאִינוּ צָרַת נַפְשׁוֹ בְּהִתְחַנְנוֹ אֵלֵינוּ וְלֹא שָׁמָעְנוּ.

We are guilty concerning our brother, for we saw the anguish of his soul when he pleaded with us, and we did not listen. (Bereishis 42:21)

It is only at this point in the Torah that we discover that Yosef had been crying out to his brothers. He had begged them to have mercy on him, and his brothers had been unwilling to hear his cries.

Years later, Yosef finds himself in another bor.

> וַיָּבֹא אֲלֵיהֶם יוֹסֵף בַּבֹּקֶר וַיַּרְא אֹתָם וְהִנָּם זֹעֲפִים.

Yosef came to them in the morning and saw that they were distressed.

He asked the Sar HaMashkim and the Sar HaOfim a remarkably simple question.

> מַדּוּעַ פְּנֵיכֶם רָעִים הַיּוֹם.

Why are your faces sad today?

If there was ever a person who could have been forgiven for being consumed by his own pain, it was Yosef HaTzaddik. His brothers had sold him, he had been falsely accused, and he had no reason to believe that he would ever see his beloved father again.

And somehow Yosef had the emotional capacity to notice that two Egyptian men were having a particularly difficult morning.

Yosef knew what it meant to sit in a bor. He knew what it meant to cry out in pain and have nobody respond. When he saw the faces of the Sar HaMashkim and the Sar HaOfim that morning, he recognized something of his own experience in theirs.

There is no question that our experiences of pain can make us less available to the people around us. When we are hurting, it takes an extraordinary amount of emotional energy simply to get through the day. But there is also a sensitivity that we can develop precisely because of the things that we have endured. There are certain expressions on another person's face that we recognize because we have seen them so many times on our own.

The first bor of Yosef HaTzaddik was where he experienced what it meant to be treated as an Acher by his own brothers. In the second bor we discover the depth of the koach of Yosef to see another person.

And it was the conversation that resulted from that one question that would ultimately bring Yosef out of the bor, reunite him with his family and enable him to sustain an entire world during the years of famine.

Generations later, when Elisha ben Avuyah would cry at the end of his life, Rabbi Meir would be there to hear him.

Yud Tes Kislev

In Perek 32 of Tanya, the Alter Rebbe explains the foundations of the mitzvah of Ahavas Yisrael.

> וְלָכֵן נִקְרְאוּ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אַחִים מַמָּשׁ מִצַּד שֹׁרֶשׁ נַפְשָׁם בַּה' אֶחָד.

All of Klal Yisrael are literally brothers by virtue of the shoresh of their neshamos in Hashem Echad.

The Alter Rebbe is teaching us something that fundamentally changes the way in which we relate to another Jew. Our relationship with him is rooted in a place far deeper than the things that ordinarily determine the nature of a relationship. We can have very little in common with another Jew in terms of our personalities, our interests and even the manner in which we live our lives. At the level of the neshamah, however, we are achim mamash.

The Baal Shem Tov was told by Mashiach that he would come when the wellsprings of Chassidus would spread outward, לכשיפוצו מעינותיך חוצה.

What does it mean for the wellsprings to reach the chutz?

Surely it means that the Torah of Chassidus must reach the Jew who has come to believe that he lives outside. The Jew who looks at other people davening and wonders why he cannot experience what they seem to be experiencing. The Jew who feels uncomfortable walking into a Beis Medrash because he remembers the person he used to be when he last walked through those doors. The Jew who has heard enough times, whether from others or from himself, that he does not belong.

There is also a chutz within each and every one of us. There are areas of our lives in which we have essentially given up on ourselves. We can learn Torah and believe deeply in the possibility of teshuvah for another Jew and still have enormous difficulty imagining that Hashem wants something to do with certain parts of our own lives.

The Torah of Chassidus needs to reach those places as well.

As we celebrate the geulah of the Alter Rebbe on Yud Tes Kislev, it is worth remembering that the Torah for which the Alter Rebbe was moser nefesh is a Torah that has the capacity to bring so many other Jews out of their own personal prisons.

Somewhere in our lives there is a Jew who needs us to do for him what Rabbi Meir did for Elisha ben Avuyah. We may have known him at a different stage of his life and find it painful to see where he is today. We may have tried to reach him already and been unsuccessful. Rabbi Meir went from one Beis Medrash to the next, and even when his Rebbe was lying on his deathbed, Rabbi Meir still believed that it was worth having one more conversation with him.

And who knows how many of us are sitting here today because at some point in our lives there was a Rebbe, a parent or a friend who saw something in us that we had long since stopped seeing in ourselves?

May we be zocheh to fulfill the avodah of Yosef HaTzaddik, יוסף ה' לי בן אחר, and may the wellsprings of Chassidus reach every Jew who has come to think of himself as an Acher, until he can hear the Ribono Shel Olam calling him בני.

With the coming of Mashiach, במהרה בימינו אמן.

Gut Yom Tov!