

Strategies for Improving Our Relationship with Hashem

Rabbi Maury Grebenau

The beautiful poetry of Az Yashir captures a triumphant moment in Jewish history when we emerge from the Yam Suf watching our tormentors drown in the depths. The Jewish people sing exuberantly in gratitude to Hashem and we repeat their words as part of our daily liturgy. In the midst of this there is a line that has numerous interpretations – all of which are fundamentally important to our relationship with Hashem.

The words I refer to are: *Zeh Keyli V'Anveyhu* – this is my G-d ,and I will *NVH* Him. I have refrained from translating the word *V'Anveyhu* since there is much debate about its etymology and translation. What is it we are proclaiming that we will do with Hashem. There are at least three interpretations of this word.

- 1) Unkelos, who authored an Aramaic translation of the Torah, says this word means that we will build a Beit HaMikdash. Rashi explains that in this approach the word comes from *naveh* which is a word referring to the Mikdash.

This conception of the Beit HaMikdash would seem to mirror the Ramban's perspective on the Mishkan, the temporary Beit HaMikdash that the Jews traveled with when they were in the desert. He writes that the main function of the Mishkan was to capture the experience we had in our national encounter with Hashem at Har Sinai. We experienced a revelation of Hashem as Giver of the Law. It continued the experience of Hashem as caring about our experience, as we saw in the exodus, and added a standard that Hashem expects us to live up to.

Rashi (Shemot 15:2) quotes the Midrash that during the splitting of the sea, even a maidservant experienced Hashem in a way that future prophets did not. The national revelation at the splitting of the sea was also worthy of capture in the Mishkan and according to Unkelos this is what the people were singing. They would capture this intense relationship and connection in space through building a physical structure. This is one strategy that we can use to fuel our relationship with Hashem: *Kedushat Makom* – holiness of space. Where do we place ourselves? How can we center places that enhance our relationship with Hashem. When I planned to attend a secular university (although I ended up attending Yeshiva University) one of my teachers in Israel brought this strategy to life by suggesting that I take pictures of the Beit Midrash (study hall) in our Yeshiva and put them up in the space I would choose to continue my Torah learning in university. When the place does not lend itself to holiness, are there things that can be done to enhance the space?

- 2) Rashi translates the word *V'anveyhu* as from the word *noy* – beauty. The word means “I will beautify Him” and the Gemara (Shabbat 133b) explains that it is a reference to the concept of *Hiddur Mitzva*.

The idea that when we perform Hashem's commandments, we also beautify the mitzva object physically. A beautiful garment to put Tzitzit on, decorating the Sukka, commissioning a beautiful Sefer Torah written in exquisite form by a scribe etc. This is a second strategy in our connection to Hashem. More than simply showing our priorities by spending our time and money on mitzvot, beautifying our mitzvot is an embodiment of the idea of finding joy and beauty in the mitzvot. Another way for us to connect appropriately to Hashem is to find the joy

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and beauty of mitzvot that we feel most connected to and to celebrate this as part of our relationship with Hashem.

- 3) The Gemara (Shabbos 133b) also offers another explanation of our mystery word: I will imitate Hashem. Rashi on the Gemara¹ says the word is a contraction of the words I (*ani*) and Him (*v'hu*).

One of the most foundational mitzvot, mentioned many times throughout the book of Devarim, is to walk in Hashem's ways. To follow the path that Hashem Himself models for us. So, a third strategy for improving our relationship with Hashem is to adjust ourselves in action and in personality to be closer to what Hashem models for us. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan zt"l explains that proximity in the spiritual world is different than in the physical world. When it comes to the physical world, we just need to move in space to be closer to something. In the spiritual world, there is no space, so two things are closer when they are more similar to one another. When we center ourselves on the goal of wanting to be closer to Hashem, we can then look at our own personality and actions, recognizing moments where small acts of kindness to others and choices can make us more holy and closer to Hashem.

By utilizing these three strategies, all included in the pasuk *Zeh Keyli V'Anveyhu*, we can make strides in our relationship with Hashem by adding connections to the divine in our day-to-day lives. We can frequenting holier spaces, find joy & beauty in the Mitzvot and making micro-adjustments in our own actions & personality in order to infuse our lives with more divine encounters.

¹ The Maharsha offers another possibility that this pinion in the Gemara really is also based on the word *noy* for beauty. The second explanation is external beautification and the third explanation is internal beautification by aligning our personality to the model Hashem provides.