TEHILIM 23: Why Bad Things Happen To Good People?

The most profound work of Jewish thought is the book of Tehillim, the Psalms of King David. In this Text, the greatest poet of the Jewish people teaches us many fundamental concepts through his powerful words and elaborate metaphors. One of the questions which King David addresses in the well known Psalm 23 is: Why do bad things happen to good people?

King David does not address this subject, in a direct philosophical way. Tehilim is more sophisticated. It refers to the rrlation between the sheep and the shepherd. With a very surprising perspective.

Verse 1: "A Psalm of David. HaShem (=God) is my shepherd. I lack nothing! 2: He takes me to graze in places of delicate herbs, and He directs me to calm waters. 3: He satisfies my needs and takes me through honest paths, for His name. 4: Even if I walk through the valley of the shadows of death, I will fear no evil, because You (God) are with me; Your rod and Your staff comfort me."

GOD IS MY SHEPHERD

This metaphor, depicting God as a shepherd, is revolutionary.

Once God is compared to a shepherd, King David continues the Psalm not from the shepherd's point of view, but from the sheep's perspective. The first thing the sheep does (verses 1, 2 and 3) is recognizing that the grass and the water she enjoys are thanks to the shepherd who provides it all. And that it is the shepherd who always guides her along paths of abundance.

THE TERRIFYING VALLEY

Suddenly, in verse 4, the Psalm changes tone. Not everything is peace, satisfaction and pleasure in the sheep's life. There are also difficult moments; the sheep feels as though the shepherd is leading her through "the valley of the shadows of death," and perceives that there is no escape. This is her end. But even in that valley of death, the sheep does not fear or despair. Why? Because the shepherd's presence reassures her. How? The Psalm mentions the shepherd's rod and the staff. "Your rod and Your staff comfort me." The rod is a short stick

that the shepherd uses to ‘hit’ the sheep and redirect them when they stray from their path. The staff, on the other hand (literally!), is a cane with a curvature in the shape of a semicircle at its top; it’s quite long, often taller than the shepherd himself. The rod is used to push the animals or stop them from straying off the path. And the staff for catching them by the neck, preventing the sheep from moving forward. Let us now decipher the metaphor.

APPRECIATION

Firstly, King David invites us to appreciate all that we have, and to practice one of the most important gestures that help our Emuna (faith); “attribution”. Discovering HaShem, finding Him, ‘seeing’ Him in every instance and event that we experience. Like the sheep, even in difficult times, we too must begin by appreciating how much we have and declaring our gratitude to our generous Shepherd.

THE ROD AND THE STAFF

The shepherd positions himself behind the sheep. Thus, the sheep can not see the shepherd with their eyes, in the same way we cannot see the Creator with our eyes. Imagine the sheep is thirsty, and goes to a river to drink water. Suddenly she feels something holding her back- it is the shepherd, who caught her neck with the staff and does not let her advance. The sheep is confused. It doesn’t make sense! She is thirsty and all she wants is some water! Why is the shepherd so unjust and cruel that he won’t let her drink? The shepherd – and the reader – know that the sheep was stopped for a good reason. Perhaps the waters of that river are poisoned or infested with crocodiles or have turbulent waves. But the problem, which has no solution, is that there is NO WAY for the sheep to understand the motives of the shepherd. No matter how justified these are, the shepherd’s mind, ways and thoughts are beyond the sheep’s intellectual abilities. She may bleat and complain, but while the shepherd definitely understands her pain, there will still be an insurmountable barrier between the sheep the shepherd in terms of ‘understanding’ impossible (probably, the main advantage we humans have over the sheep is that we do understand why we don’t understand).

I WILL NOT FEAR BECAUSE YOU ARE WITH ME

The sole comfort of the sheep is that even when she walks through the valley of death without understanding why, the

sheep senses that the shepherd is there. Ironically, it is sometimes when the shepherd intervenes in a painful way and the sheep feels the rod and the staff, that she realizes her shepherd taking care of a situation. And as long as the shepherd is there, she is not afraid. The only thing that would terrorize her is the shepherd abandoning her.

A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

With this exquisite metaphor, “God as our shepherd,” King David helps us understand is that in regard to God we are like sheep. Many things happen to us, which, from our point of view do not make any sense. We suffer “unjustly,” sometimes we feel the sting of the blow (illness, loss, suffering) or sometimes we feel something stopping us from moving, things not going well for us, invisible, inexplicable barriers preventing us from moving forward…. Things can be so bad that sometimes we feel as though we’re on the threshold of death… and we don’t understand why. But in those times, we need attribution. We must believe that God is present. He is behind us, guiding us through the paths- the sometimes very difficult, inexplicable and painful paths- that He Himself brought us to!

And the most important idea reflected in this Psalm, is that the sheep has no clue why she suffers but when she does, instinctively the sheep returns to the right path, not because she ‘understands’ the shepherd. Rather, because she knows that the shepherd is behind the blow, and she trusts Him.

One of the he most important ideas reflected in this Psalm, is that the sheep has no clue why she suffers but when she does, she instinctively returns to the right path, not because she ‘understands’ the shepherd's intervention, but because she knows that the shepherd is behind her, and she trusts Him.