

Tsfat: The City of Those Seeking the Hidden

By: Dr. Leah Adams

I was in Tsfat two weeks ago. As in many places in Eretz Yisroel, it is an odd combination of the ancient stones being driven on by modern cars. It is a mix of deep philosophical thought which rises above the boutiques and the cafes. One theme that is prevalent is that of individuals seeking to “find” themselves. I met a woman who lived the high speed life of corporate living and, despite her wealth and obvious stature in society, felt unfulfilled. I met a man who lived with the Alaskan Indians and taught English to the underprivileged in no-man’s land in Africa, who felt that his physical life needed spirituality. I met teens who had been living the average American lifestyle of popular dress, entertainment and even street drugs, who, despite their supposed “fun” life felt sad.

While in Tsfat I attended a shiur, given by Baruch Erdstein. He teaches Torah, produces music and leads guided tours of the city. He spoke about the Mishna in Pirkei Avot (3:7) that states that ‘he who stops his learning and comments how beautiful is this tree. . . it is as if he warrants (severe) punishment.’ Baruch explained that the problem in this behavior is that the person disconnected his learning, his spiritual side, from the physical world. He limited his spirituality by putting on his material world glasses rather than expanding the material world by viewing it through spiritual eyes. We must see all as the creation of, extension of and therefore reflection of, the Creator. In Judaism we try to constantly elevate even the most mundane activities by recognizing the role of the Creator in all of them. The most obvious example that comes to mind is the recitation of the Bracha of Asher Yatzar, the bracha which we say after using the bathroom.

Now, you might ask yourself, what does paragraph one about people finding themselves, have to do with paragraph two about sanctifying our materialistic world? Next, you might ask, what does any of this have to do with psychology. Actually, I’ll let you in on a little secret, the Torah teacher in paragraph two is the English teacher in paragraph one! This begs the question, if he stayed a teacher, what changed between the two scenarios?

The answer to the questions above is this: In order for us to feel good about ourselves, value ourselves and have self-esteem, we must do something

meaningful with our lives. The difficulty with this concept is that most of us will never climb Mount Everest, win the Nobel Peace Prize for our contributions to humanity or even single-handedly support an entire Torah institution. In comparison to some of those accomplishments not only do we not view ourselves as valuable but even as rather useless. The key, therefore, is not that we do something different with our lives that is meaningful but rather that we learn to view what we already do as meaningful!

Here's how this works. We take the lesson from the Mishna above and view all that we do, produce, fix, and change as Holy. How? We learn to recognize that by washing our children's clothes for Yeshiva and for Shabbos (that's about as mundane and materialistically involved as we can get), we are taking care of and being *michanech* (educating) Hashem's creatures and thereby performing Holy work. We learn to recognize that by taking in our neighbor's mail while they are away, we are performing the mitzvah of *Viahavta Lireacha Kamocha* (love for your fellow man) and thereby performing Holy work. We even learn to recognize that by engaging in productive teamwork with our co-workers, prompted by the concept of *Kol Yisroel Areivim Ze Baze* (the inherent interconnectedness between Jews), we are performing Holy work. All of a sudden, our lives, which seemed so mundane and materialistic (like the tree), have taken on significance (like the learning discussed in the Mishna). In order for this concept to work properly, though, we have to define what is important according to Torah guidelines. While teaching illiterate children in underprivileged countries seems like it is important, it's performance in the absence of Torah guidelines leading the teacher's behavior, lacks true meaning.

We started at paragraph one, went on to number two, back to two and will finish off right where we started. What the people who are searching discover is that when they learn to recognize the Creator, their lives achieve meaning. Now that they, really we, feel connected to the One Above and learn to recognize His existence in every tree, person and activity, our existence as individuals involved in the everyday activities of life, attains the greatest meaning possible.

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