



Perfect Justice

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In describing the just ways of Hashem, the Torah states: “A reliable G-d, without injustice, He is trustworthy and without iniquity” (Devarim 32:4). The question, though, remains why it is necessary to describe Hashem as being free from injustice (*ein aveil*). It has already stated that He rewards and punishes justly, is it not redundant to add that He is not flawed in his method of determining rewards and punishments, and will not perpetrate evil?!

There is a well-known answer attributed to R Yisroel Salanter, that explains that temporal systems of justice can, of necessity, only dispense partial justice. A judge might be able to determine guilt and apply the law fairly. But can any system devised and applied by humans claim to be absolute and fair? The perpetrator may well deserve a life sentence for his crime. But his family will be deprived of the love and support of a father (criminals can be good parents!), a wife may well be left to struggle alone though life and be impacted financially & emotionally. Who can possibly determine whether his brother, parents, friends, colleagues etc. deserve to be denied of his company, counsel, support?

Only a Divine Judge can weigh up every scintilla of suffering, and decide whether all the myriad victims are truly deserving of the level of pain and anguish that will be created by someone’s pain, suffering or absence. If any of them are found to be impacted unfairly, the perpetrator gets a stay of execution.

A practical application of this concept, says R Elya Lopian ZTL, especially during the *Yomim Noraim*, is quite simple. Make yourself a part of as many people’s lives as possible! The more people that you connect to, help

and support, the less likely you will be, to be punished.

The Gemara Yerushalmi (Ta’anis 3:11) has an account of an episode of a particularly vicious drought, that ravaged *Eretz Yisrael*. The Torah leader of the generation, the venerable R’ Yochanan ben Zakai had a very original response to this challenge, one which, at first blush, appears to be rather bizarre. He summoned his barber, and commanded him to go to the Shul, stand in front of the *heichal*, and announce that R’ Yochanan ben Zakai wanted to have a haircut and that he wasn’t able to, because he didn’t have the strength, as a result of the drought. The response was instantaneous, the heavens opened immediately, and rain fell.

Hundreds of thousands of people were suffering as a result of the drought, inconveniencing them in so many ways. There was not enough water for drinking, for cooking, for bathing. Yet, all that apparently made no impact in *shamayim*. What made an impact is that fact that R’ Yochanan ben Zakai was inconvenienced a little bit and could not get a haircut. How do we make sense of this?! Why should R’ Yochanan ben Zakai’s haircut matter more than the suffering of thousands of others?

R’ Elchanan Wasserman zt”l hy”d utilises the principle outlined above. Hashem’s justice is exact and precise. Hashem had calculated that the population that suffered during the drought, deserved that level of suffering. There was no injustice in the *din* meted out whatsoever. However, R’ Yochanan ben Zakai did not deserve to be punished. R’ Yochanan ben Zakai did not deserve to suffer with everyone else. He therefore had a right to say to Hashem, “It’s not fair -- I’m suffering too.” And even if that suffering was trivial -- it was just a haircut -- precisely because Hashem’s justice is absolutely fair and R’ Yochanan ben Zakai did not deserve it, the decree to bring about the drought was rescinded.

Additionally, we learn an important lesson about the potency of *tefilla*. Besides for the insight into the precision of Divine justice, we learn that *tefilla* that emanates from a real and personal sense of identifying with the issue at a personal level, has much greater impact. It wasn’t enough for him to daven in general terms. He had to do something like schedule his haircut, to arouse those feelings. Furthermore, we see that one *tefilla* can tip the balance! Even for the great R’ Yochanan ben Zakai, there is no comparison between the *tefillos* uttered over the pain and suffering of others and *tefillos* when that pain and suffering hits home, even in a minor way.

One can never know whether our personal *tefilla* will make all the difference. One *tefilla* that takes ownership of the suffering of another Jew “*Hatzur tamim pa’alo*” the entire *Klal Yisrael* can experience salvation in order to spare one individual from suffering unjustly.

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