



by Rabbi Dr Raymond Apple z"l

KI TAVO

The Pain & the Gain

Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, is an anthology on the art of wise living.

One of its notable sayings (5:26) is a proverb of three Aramaic words - L'FUM TZA'ARA AGRA, "According to the effort is the reward" or "According to the pain is the gain".

The author was Ben Hei-Hei, a convert and disciple of Hillel. His difficult decision to leave Roman society in order to become a Jew reflected his belief that anything important requires effort but is proved worthwhile in the end.

His advice is especially pertinent in the lead-up to Rosh HaShana, when God assesses His creation and we assess our own achievements and failures.

So often in the past year - and in every year - we have tried the easy way. We have looked for a maximum of reward for a minimum of effort. Finally of course we have sadly recognised that nothing really worthwhile was ever attained without

perseverance and hard work.

Longfellow said,

*The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.*

The artist Whistler, when asked why he charged such high fees, said that he charged not for the few hours' work of painting but for the lifetime of experience which trained him to become a skilled artist.

The Kotzker Rebbe made a similar point about the art of prayer. "Why do the prayers one utters seem so ineffective?" he was asked.

His answer was that just as a workman can take all day to prepare for the job he does (for example, a woodcutter spends hours sharpening his saw and only a short time actually cutting the wood), so prayer, too, is a craft for which one has to prepare painstakingly and carefully.

The Prayer of Us & Them

Familiar from the daily prayer book, where it concludes every service of the year, Aleinu was originally composed for the Rosh HaShana liturgy.

During Musaf, three great themes are explored - MALCHİYOT, God's Sovereignty; ZICHRONOT, Divine

Remembrance of our Deeds; and SHOFAROT, the Messianic Redemption. The introductory hymn to MALCHİYOT is Aleinu, attributed to Rav (3rd cent. Babylonia) but probably written earlier.

The first passage is nationalistic. It speaks of the special responsibility God gave to the Jewish people.

The second passage is universalistic, yearning for the day when all mankind will acknowledge the King of all Creation.

The prayer skilfully interweaves Biblical and rabbinic allusions, using a form of parallelism that constantly offers two ways of saying things. The first passage, for instance, is structured thus:

Three Parallelisms:

1. It is our duty to praise the Lord of all, to ascribe greatness to the Creator of the Beginning,
2. He made us unlike other nations on earth, with a lot unlike theirs and a destiny unlike all their multitude.
3. Original text: They bow down to vanity and emptiness, and worship a god that cannot save.

Observation:

We bow down, worship and acknowledge the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed be He;

Three Parallelisms:

1. He stretched out the heavens and established the earth;
2. His glory dwells in the heavens above, His majesty in the loftiest heights.
3. He is our God, there is no other: He is truly our King, there is none beside Him;

Observation:

It is written in His Torah, "Know this day and take to heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath: there is no other" (D'varim 4:39).

The second passage is messianic. It prays for TIKUN OLAM, the "repair of the world", and yearns for mankind to be one and to call on the name of the One God who created heaven and earth (Zechariya 14:9). It is not necessary for everyone to become Jewish, but all will worship the Jewish God.

Aleinu has undergone immense persecution through the ages.

The reference in the first passage to heathens bowing down to vanity and emptiness and worshipping a god that cannot save, was alleged to be an insult to Christianity. Nothing that Jews said by way of explanation could prevent attacks and murders as punishment for the alleged crime.

Yet these words actually come straight out of the Book of Yishayahu (30:7, 45:20). Neither Yishayahu in the 8th pre-Christian century nor Rav, who introduced Aleinu to the Rosh HaShana service, knew any Christians.

Both had idolaters in mind, but that was too obvious and logical for the antisemites to grasp, and the only way to save Aleinu in some European countries was to eliminate the controversial sentence altogether, though it is still maintained in the Sephardi ritual and in many Ashkenazi communities. -OZ

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH