

Navigating the Waters of Personal Expression: What Belongs In Reshus Harabim and What Does Not

19.04 Private Emotions

Related by the Rav in his lecture on the "The Abridged Havinenu Prayer," at the RCA Midwinter Conference, February 7, 1968.

Jews do confess, but confession is a private matter between the individual and the Almighty. In my opinion, this is because of the Jew's typical modesty and shyness. The noblest and most exalted feelings that the Jew experiences must remain like the Ark of the Covenant, concealed behind the curtain. "And the curtain shall separate for you between the Holy and the Holy of Holies" [Exodus 26:33]. The sanctuary of the human person is his emotional life, not his logical life. The Ark is with us in each person's emotional life, concealed behind the curtain. This aspect of the human



19.04 Private Emotions

being is protected from the eye of the cynic, the glance of the skeptic, the ridicule of the so-called practical and realistic man.

The Jew, as a father, never spoke of his love for his children. Never! I want to tell you something. My relationship with my father was very close. He was my rebbe. I had no other rebbe. Whatever I am intellectually is due to him. He was very close to me, and I was very close to him. There was an existential unity between us. Nevertheless, he never told me that he liked me. He never kissed me, and I never kissed him. I remember that on one occasion I was departing, and it was doubtful whether I would ever see him again. We just shook hands and he said: "Go in peace, and let God be with you." As a matter of fact, someone watching this cold, chilly scene of father and son parting said: "That's the Brisker lomdus!" [Laughter.] The truth is that we did not spell out our love for our children in objective terms. Neither did Jews as husband or as wife spell out their love for each other. No matter how much devotion, dedication, mutual trust, and love bound them to each other, they could not speak about it. This love was nurtured in privacy. "It is there that I will set My meetings with you and I shall speak with you atop the cover, from between the two cherubim that are on the Ark of the Testimonial-Tablets" [Exodus 25:22]. [Only in the privacy of the Holy of Holies is such a rendezvous possible.]

Apparently, the same method was applied in our relationship with the Almighty. We never told anybody and never wrote about our love and dedication for the Almighty. We have not told anybody about our great romance with the Almighty and His with us. There is no literature about this. The only book we have on this topic is Shir ha-Shirim [Song of Songs], and it is couched in symbols. Only through such symbolism could our romance with the Almighty be presented.

However, I do not believe that we can afford to be as reluctant, modest, and shy today as we were in the past about describing our relationship with the Almighty. Why? The reason is simple. In the past, this great experience of the tradition was not handed

169

down from generation to generation through the medium of words. It was absorbed through osmosis; somehow, through silence. We used to observe. I observed my father praying on Rosh Hashanah. That is an experience I will never forget. If on Yom Kippur I feel deficient in my own dedication, piety, and enthusiasm, no philosophical ideas can help me at such a time. If I want to inspire myself, I must visualize my grandfather Reb Chaim reciting his prayers on these Holy Days. I still recall that as a young child on Yom Kippur I observed his recitation of the refrain: "When the priests and the people, who were standing in the Temple court, heard God's glorious and revered Name clearly expressed by the high priest with holiness and purity" [Musaf service for Yom Kippur, trans. Philip Birnbaum, p. 816]. He was then a man completely consumed by nostalgia and yearning. This emotion was passed on from generation to generation simply through observation and viewing. Today in America, however, and in the Western world, this is completely lost. The father cannot pass it on to his son. The father does not possess these emotions, because he never observed and experienced them. He cannot expect his son to receive something he himself does not possess.

Therefore it is up to the Yeshiva and the teacher to open up the emotional world of Judaism to the students. I do not know how one can do so. Believe me, I have told you many times that before Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur I can teach my students the laws and the philosophy of these Holy Days. I am not a bad teacher. However, I cannot transmit my recollections to them. If I want to transmit my experiences, I have to transmit myself, my own heart. How can I merge my soul and personality with my students? It is very difficult. Yet it is exactly what is lacking on the American scene.¹ That is why American Jews do not pray as they should—and I am speaking of those who pray three times a day. There is no true avodah she-be-lev, worship of the heart, when it is only a mechanical recitation. The American Jew does not experience Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as the Jew of old did. He



(2) משלי יב כה

דאגה בלב איש ישחנה ודבר טוב ישמחנה.

(3) סנהדרין ק:

אלא משום דכתיב לא תעיל דויה בלבך
דגברי גיברין קטל דויה הא שלמה אמרה
(משלי יב, כה) דאגה בלב איש ישחנה ר'
אמי ור' אסי חד אמר ישחנה מדעתו וחד
אמר ישחנה לאחרים.

Rather, perhaps the book poses a difficulty because it is written there: Do not introduce anxiety into your heart, as anxiety has killed mighty men (Ben Sira 14:1; 30:29). Didn't Solomon already say it in the verse: "Anxiety in a man's heart dejects him [yashhena]" (Proverbs 12:25)? Rabbi Ami and Rabbi Asi interpret the term homiletically and read it as yesihenna. One says that it means: He shall remove it [yesihenna] from his mind, and that will ease his anxiety. And one says: He shall tell it [yesihenna] to others, and that will ease his anxiety. Both agree with the statement of ben Sira.

(4) חדריו, פרקים אישיים מאת מרן הרב קוק ז"ל, דף טו-טז

"הנני מחפש תמיד מה שבתוך נשמת. והעבודות החיצונה היא מסיעה את הדעה מהחיפוש הפנימי לבקש לשוא בקצה הארץ את אשר לא ימצא במעמקי נפשי."
"אני צריך לדבר הרבה אודות עצמי. עניני עצמיותי מכרחים להתברר לי הרבה מאד. בהבנתי את עצמי אבין את הכל, את העולם, ואת החיים, עד הגעת הבינה למקור החיים."

5) Rav Kook, *The Spiritual Revolution of Rav Kook*, p. 90-91

"Saying words out loud has a powerful effect on one's life. When a word is spoken, great light emerges with it. The deeper one pierces into the light of prayer, the greater the power of light that they will bring and the more influence they will have to create change. The clearer the expression, the clearer the light and the more focused its effect. The words become reality, and it is impossible that prayer will have no result. (Olas Reiyah "Tefillah" 1.4)

"The waves of the soul are constantly being moved through the tremendous power of speech... Any word that is drawn from a person's inner desire for holiness-even when it appears to be in simple conversation-is really sourced in the inner essence of a person's will. Therefore, when people have a deep vision...every conversation that comes from their spirit opens up channels of goodness... as it is written 'The simple conversations of *talmidei chachamim* must be studied. In fact, some of these are equal to the entire Torah.'" (Oros haKodesh 3, p.281)