

Afterword

The Love of Companions

First Steps on The Path

The beit midrash hummed with activity on a daily basis. Rabbi Baruch Shalom sat with us, advising us, helping us with our study, and teaching us by his own example how to serve God in the way that his father, the Baal HaSulam, had received from his teachers, the sages of Kalozhin, Belz, and Porisov. These basic ideas and teachings on how each one of us may serve the Creator in actual practice permeate all the Baal HaSulam's writings, and not a day went by without one or other of these ideas being taught or discussed in the beit midrash. Indeed, they were in its very atmosphere. Of course, we did not learn these steps in the service of God in an orderly way, but we learned them as they arose naturally out of the events of our lives or in the material we were studying.

Our purpose was to strive to come to serve our Creator unconditionally. Of all the ideas we were given to help us in this, one stands out above them all: the practice of loving our companions; a practice which is a preliminary step to loving all our fellow human beings. The Baal HaSulam spoke on the importance of this in almost every letter that he wrote to his students when he was away from them:

I request each one of you to make all possible effort to love each of the companions as much as you love yourselves. This means that when one of your fellows is suffering you feel as sorrowful over his trouble as if it was your own; and that you join in your companions' happiness and joys to the greatest possible extent.

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And I hope that you will fulfill my words in this and bring this matter to its completion.¹

Yet again, I request you to make extreme efforts in the love of companions. Discover new ways to increase the love between each of you and also ways to nullify those appetites that the ego desires, because these produce only hatred—and among those who are trying to serve the Creator, hatred or jealousy have no place. On the contrary, only compassion and love should be present. This matter is simple.

I've written that each of you should show my letters to the others, for these matters are spoken from one unity [Rabbi Ashlag] to another unity [all the students as a whole]. You should have one Torah with which to subdue the ego and to sanctify the soul. Do not change anything, even inadvertently, as we are so liable to do when bribed by the ego. It would be fitting for you to consider my words deeply from this day forth, for they are your life and the length of your days, and it is not for my benefit that I seek this.²

A person who is sorrowful relates his trouble to his companions because it is impossible for him to hide his feelings or refrain. So I tell you now of my feeling of sorrow concerning all of you that "today" goes by into "tomorrow," and instead of "now" you say "later." There is no remedy for this except to make an effort and understand this grave error and distortion, for one who needs the salvation of God can be saved only when he needs this salvation today, whereas one who can wait till tomorrow may well find that he is waiting years, God forbid.

You have fallen into this trap through negligence in carrying out my request to you to make an effort in the love between the companions. As I have explained to you, in every possible term, there is enough light in this virtue alone with which to fulfill all your lacks. And even if you cannot ascend to heaven, I have laid before you pathways for your use on earth. Why haven't you redoubled your efforts in this work?

Besides, apart from the light that is hidden in this issue—whose greatness you cannot imagine—you need to know that in each member of the group are to be found many sparks of holiness. If you were to gather together all these sparks of holiness to one place, in one focused will, when sitting together in brotherhood, love, and friendship, then, certainly, together you would attain an important level of the light of holiness—the illumination of life. I have already spoken on this at length in all my letters to the companions. I have also requested that each of you should show every letter to his fellows. Do so now, and I beg of you from this day forth to understand me and obey me in this, at least in what you are able to do, for then God will be able to open to us His good treasure.³

In this world of the cellphone and the personal computer, individuals are more socially isolated than ever before. Nowadays it is perfectly possible, and often more convenient, to learn the teachings of Rabbi Ashlag by studying alone with a book or over the internet. However, if we do this as our sole contact with this teaching, we miss a vital component of the teachings, and that is our relationship with other students. When we learn together, we learn, not only Rabbi Ashlag's teachings, but we learn from each other's life experience and ways of putting the teachings into practice. We also learn other ways of understanding these teachings and gain new perspective on how to value the privilege of having this learning in our lives. We learn how to judge each other meritoriously, endeavoring to see only the good in each other and learning to overlook our companions' deficiencies. Furthermore, we unite in the common purpose of desiring to serve God and our fellow unconditionally.

Rabbi Ashlag wrote much on the attitude we need to adopt towards each other so that we can learn from each other. Here is what he writes in his book, *Matan Torah*:

A person who feels himself to be greater cannot receive from one whom he considers to be lesser than himself, especially with regard to being moved by his words. Only one who feels himself