

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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Chapter XXXV: Naso (Num. 4:21–7:89)

Essay 12. The righteous are greater at their deaths

[חולין] פֶּרֶק קמ"א גְּדוּלִים צְדִיקִים בְּמִיתָתָם יוֹתֵר מִבְּחַיֵּיהֶם. יֵשׁ לְדַקְדָּק לָמָּה נֶקְטָה דְּנִקְא הַלְשׁוֹן שֶׁל גְּדוּלִים, וְעוֹד דְּנִקְא בְּמִיתָתָם דְּמִשְׁמַע בְּשַׁעַת מִיתָה וְלֹא אָמַר יָפָה פֶּתֹן שֶׁל צְדִיקִים מֵתִים מִהַצְדִּיקִים חַיִּים.

The first chapter of [Chullin],¹ page 7b, quotes Rabbi Chama bar Chanina as saying, “The righteous are greater [*gedolim*] [גְּדוּלִים] at their deaths, more so than during their lifetimes.” We should scrutinize why this particularly uses the language of *gedolim*; and also particularly uses the language of “at their deaths,” which has the meaning of “at the hour of death.”² Thus, Rabbi Nachmani raises two questions. First, the word *gedolim* and the singular form *gadol* has the meaning “large,” “big,” “adult,” “mature,” “great,” etc. Why not use a different synonym for “superior”? For example, why doesn’t it say, “the strength of the righteous dead is nicer [*yafeh*] [יָפָה] than [the strength of] the living righteous”? The second question is why the righteous are greater at the moment of their deaths than at some later time.

וְיֵשׁ לֵאמֹר שֶׁהַצְדִּיקִים נִקְרְאִים בְּנֵי־הַקָּדוֹשׁ הַשֶּׁהֵרֵי עוֹשִׂים רְצוֹנוֹ שֶׁל מְקוֹם, וְכֵן הִפְתּוּב אֹמֵר "ה' אָמַר אֵלַי בְּנֵי אֶתָּה", "בְּנֵי־אֶתָּה לְה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם".

Rabbi Nachmani addresses his first question. **It can be said that the righteous are called children of the Holy One, Blessed be He, for they do the will of the Omnipresent. Thus, Scripture says, “The L-rd said to me, ‘You are my son’ ” (Ps. 2:7). “You are children of the L-rd your G-d” (Deut. 14:1).**

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¹ The first edition incorrectly read “Sotah.” The translator has corrected to “Chullin.”

² The Gemara actually cites Scripture that would support an interpretation of “after death,” rather than at the moment of death. “As Rabbi Chama bar Chanina says: The righteous are greater [*gedolim*] [גְּדוּלִים] at their deaths, more so than during their lifetimes, as it is stated: ‘And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that they spied a raiding party; and they cast the man into the tomb of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet’ (II Kings 13:21).”

ובפרק קמא דמציעא (דף י"ב) אמרינו בן גדול וסומא על שלחן אביו זהו קטן, קטן ואינו סומא על שלחן אביו זהו גדול. ואף כן הצדיקים כל זמן שהם חיים הם סומכים על שלחן הקב"ה שיתן להם מזונות ופרנסה, שאין להם כלום משלהם דשכר מצוה בהאי עלמא ליפא. ומשום הכי נקראו קטנים, אמנם כשמתו והם אוכלים משלהם ונהנים בעולם הבא כפי זכותם אז נקראו גדולים, שאינם סומכים עוד על שלחן אביהם.

In the first chapter of tractate Bava Metzia (page 12b), it is said that an adult son [gadol] who depends on the table of his father is considered immature, [while] a young son who does not depend on the table of his father is considered mature [gadol]. As noted above, the righteous are considered children of G-d. Even here, the righteous—as long as they live—are dependent upon the table of the Holy One, Blessed be He, Who gives them food and livelihood. For they have nothing of their own, for the reward of a mitzvah is not in this world, but is reserved for the World to Come. For this reason, they are called “immature” while they are alive. But when they die, and they eat what is rightfully theirs, and they enjoy the World to Come according to their merits—then they are called “mature” [gedolim], for they no longer depend upon the table of their Father.

אי נמי כדאמרינו בעלמא גדול ואינו יודע מיילי דאבואה קטן קרי ליה. ואף הצדיקים בעולם הזה אינם יודעים דרכי הקב"ה כמו ששאל משה "הודעני נא" וכו', מפני מה יש צדיק וטוב לו וצדיק ורע לו. וכסברת ר' מאיר דאמר בברכות שנים נמנו לו ואחת לא נתנו לו וכו'. אמנם לאחר מיתה מתדבקים בהקב"ה ויודעים דרכיו ומשום הכי נקראו גדולים ממש, שבעולם הזה אף על פי שהם גדולים לעיני בני אדם מכל מקום הם קטנים לגבי אביהם של מעלה, אבל כשמתו הם גדולים לגמרי, ועקר גדולתם היינו בשעת מיתתם שאז מראין להם כל מתן שכרן.

Alternatively, as we say generally, [if one is an] adult [gadol], but he doesn't know his father's [business] matters, he is called “a minor,” i.e., immature.³ Even the righteous in this world do not know the ways of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as Moses petitioned: “ ‘Pray let me know Your ways, and I will know You’ (Ex. 33:13). [Moses] said before [G-d]: Master of the Universe, why is it that one righteous person prospers, one righteous person suffers, one wicked person prospers, one wicked person suffers?” (Berachot 7a). According to the opinion of Rabbi Meir, who said in tractate Berachot 7a, “Two [of Moses' requests] were granted to him, and one was not granted to him. [G-d granted him that the Divine Presence would rest upon Israel and not leave, and that the Divine Presence would not rest upon the nations of the world, but G-d did not reveal to Moses the ways in which He conducts the world.]” However, after death, [the righteous] attach themselves to the Holy One, Blessed be He, and know His ways, and because of this they are called great [gedolim], literally, for in this world, even though [the righteous] are great in the eyes of man, in any case they are small with relation to their Father Above. But when they die, they become thoroughly great, and the principal part of their greatness is at the hour of their deaths, for then they are shown all the rewards of their labor in keeping the mitzvot.⁴

³ Shevuot 42a; Ketubot 18a; Gittin 50a, 51b.

⁴ Pirkei Avot 2:16, “Know that the grant of reward unto the righteous is in the Future to Come.”

Thus, for the first question, of why Rabbi Chama bar Chanina used the word *gedolim* to describe the character of the righteous at their deaths, Rabbi Nachmani has proposed that the righteous person “graduates” from being like a *katan* [minor child] in the eyes of G-d to being a *gadol* [mature adult] at his death, or at least after his death. The first proposed solution is because the righteous will receive his reward upon death, at which point he will no longer be eating at his Father’s table, but will be enjoying the fruits of his own labor. The second proposed solution is because after death, he will develop a deeper understanding of his Heavenly Father, and will no longer be like one who doesn’t know his Father’s matters.

These solutions can also have implications for the second question that Rabbi Nachmani has raised, as to why Rabbi Chama bar Chanina indicated that this would happen “at death,” instead of “after death.” For the reward that the righteous obtains in the World to Come, and his ability to draw closer to G-d, will become available immediately upon death. Rabbi Nachmani further considers his second question:

וְעוֹד לְפִי שֶׁשָׁשָׂה עֵינַי יְמֵיהֶם וְנִפְרָדִים זֶה מִזֶּה וּבְכָל יוֹם עוֹשִׂים אֵינָהּ תִּיקוּן לְנִשְׁמָתָם וְיוֹם אֶחָד נִכְלָל בְּחֻבֵירוֹ. אָבָל בְּשַׁעַת מִיתָתָם מִתְחַבְּרִים כָּל הַיָּמִים זֶה בְּזֶה בְּסוֹד "וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמוֹת", "וַיִּקְרְבוּ יְמֵי דָוִד לְמוֹת". וְעַיִן בְּזֶה רַפְשֵׁת וַיְהִי (דף רכ"א) דְּפָרִיז הֵתָם וְכִי בְּכַמָּה יוֹמֵי מִית בְּרַ נֶשׁ, וְהָא בְּשַׁעַתָּא חֲדָא, וּבְרַגְעָא חֲדָא, מִית וְנִפְיָק מֵעֲלָמָא וְכוּ'. וּמִשּׁוּם הַכִּי אָמַר דְּנִקְא גְדוֹלִים צְדִיקִים בְּמִיתָתָם וְכוּ'.

Further, when they are alive, their days are separated from each other, and every day they make some correction to their soul, and one day is like the next. But at the time of their deaths, all the days are connected with each other in an esoteric manner, as it says, “**and the days of Israel to die drew near**” (Gen. 47:29), “**and the days of David to die drew near**” (I Kings 2:1). **Also, see in the Zohar, parshat Vayechi (page 221b), [Rabbi Yosi] objected there,** noting:

It is not written, “and the day of Israel to die drew near,” rather “the days,” **for on how many days does a man die? It happens in one hour, in one moment, he dies and leaves the world.**” Rather, thus we learned, that when the Holy One, Blessed be He, wants to take back a person’s spirit to Himself, all of the days that the person had in this world are reviewed before him and entered for accounting, and when they are brought before Him to be entered into the ledger, the man dies, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, takes back his spirit.

- Zohar I:221b

Thus, according to this view a person is judged immediately upon death, and **because of this, it says specifically, “The righteous are greater [*gedolim*] [גְדוֹלִים] at their deaths,”** i.e., immediately upon their deaths, “more so than during their lifetimes.”⁵

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⁵ The translator is unsure how this essay relates to the parsha.