

And the Keruvim... and their faces toward one another (25:20)

The *Talmud Bava Basra* 99a debates how the *Keruvim* stood. What position toward one another did they maintain? One opinion posits that they stood with their faces toward one another, while the other opinion is that they faced toward the House, i.e., eastward towards the Holy. The question raised from the *pasuk* which states: *u'pneihem laBayis*, "With their faces toward the House," is resolved by *Chazal*, who distinguish between: *b'zman she'Yisrael osin retzono shel Makom*, "when the nation does the will of Hashem," when the *Keruvim* faced one another; and when the nation did not perform the will of Hashem, which was indicated by their facing the House.

The *Keruvim* that stood above the *Aron HaKodesh* in the *Kodshei Kodoshim*, Holy of Holies, manifested varied situations which served as the barometer of the people's relationship *vis-à-vis* Hashem. When the *Keruvim* stood side by side, facing the House, it was not a good sign. It indicated that *Klal Yisrael's* service to Hashem was lacking; their behavior was deficient. When they looked at one another, it projected an image of love, symbolizing the love that prevailed between Hashem and His People. When the nation strayed, the *Keruvim* turned toward the House to remind the people that something was amiss; they were not fulfilling their obligations (to the House).

What is the meaning of *panim el panim*, "facing toward one another"? Obviously, it has a deeper meaning than a mere positional encounter towards one to another. **Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl**, offers the following analogy: A man enters his home, his hands filled with packages of all sizes and weight. He calls out to his wife, "I picked up everything that was on the list." His wife replies tersely, "Thanks," and instructs him where to put the groceries that he bought. In other words, the husband has just returned from a shopping expedition, worn out and tired. His wife barely acknowledges his return, probably taking it for granted that this is the way it should be. After all – it is only groceries. Let us change the scenario a bit and imagine the husband arriving home with a bouquet of flowers for his wife. Then, she will not simply instruct him to place them in a certain vase. She will stop to look at them, smell them, appreciate them. This is the meaning of "face to face" – a reflection of love, of caring.

When a Jew performs a *mitzvah*, he must demonstrate his care for the *mitzvah* and his love for its Author – Hashem. He must "face" Hashem, *panim el panim*. A Jew arises in the morning and begins his day with *Modeh Ani* – "I thank (You, Hashem)"; *lefanecha* – "I stand before You in praise and gratitude." He must place emphasis on the *lefanecha*, before You. He washes his hands and recites the *brachah*, blessing, *Baruch Ata Hashem*. Does he underscore in his mind to Whom he is speaking – before Whom he is standing? This is how one should go through his day, reflecting the acute awareness that he stands before Hashem.

Let us stop for a moment and view ourselves through the perspective of reality. We walk/drive to *shul* while reading our text and email messages. Then, of course, we must respond. One does not want to be rude. We enter the sanctuary of the *shul*, but do not put the phone away. It is placed

right next to our *Siddur* – just in case something that requires our attention comes up during *davening*. We “rarely” answer the phone during *Shemoneh Esrai* – the rest of *davening* is not as fortunate. Now, is this *panim el panim*?

Hashem calls out to us: “I want to see you face to face.” Sadly, we do not hear Him, because we are too busy responding to our most recent text!

How do we understand this concept of *panim el panim* in the context of the *Churban Bais Hamikdash*? When the gentile attackers entered the Holy of Holies, they saw that the *Keruvim* were looking at one another. Obviously, this was not a good time for the Jews. This was a period of anger. Hashem was expressing His displeasure with us. Perhaps the *Keruvim* should not have been positioned toward one another. The commentators offer explanations for this anomaly, of which I will quote two.

When the *Keruvim* were found to be facing one another during the destruction of the Temple, this was interpreted as Hashem’s “goodbye kiss” to *Klal Yisrael* prior to their leaving the land to go into exile. We have yet to return from the exile, but we will always remember Hashem’s “good bye.” The kiss reflected love and yearning for the day when we could ultimately return.

Rav Shimshon Pincus suggests that the *panim el panim* of the *Keruvim* was a sort of “last will and testament” to *Klal Yisrael*. As long as the nation was comfortably ensconced in *Eretz Yisrael*, it might have been possible to maintain the lesser, “side by side” relationship with Hashem. When the nation was exiled and they no longer had the good fortune of the protective barrier of the *Bais Hamikdash*, they were in a serious predicament. When the path to *Gehinom*, Purgatory, was glaring at them, about to swallow them up at the slightest wrong move on their part, they were literally on shaky ground. They must have known that the path to spiritual survival is always open to those who maintain a *panim el panim* relationship with Hashem. Otherwise, without the “love,” we cannot make it. We may not have the *Bais Hamikdash* in our midst – but we will always have Hashem.