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SPRECHER

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Prayer For Corona Victims During Sefira

What do we hope to accomplish when praying for a person stricken with CORONA? G-D knows exactly what we need. My Rebbe Rav Pam, would repeat the question a cancer patient asked him in all sincerity. If pain and suffering are caused by one's sins (Shabbat 55) and serve as a purifying process to spare the person from suffering in Gehenom, how may one pray that G-D remove the pain?

Does a critically ill patient tell the physician not to operate or administer painful treatments to cure him of the deadly illness? Of course not! In fact, he pays the surgeon great sums of money to do so. If G-D, the Great Physician, is administering treatments to cleanse me of my sins, asks the patient, how can I pray that the suffering be removed?

Rav Pam related that this very question is answered by Rav Chaim Volozhin in Nefesh HaChaim. Rav Chaim explains

that praying to G-D to remove personal or communal suffering is NOT an attempt to change G-D's mind. One's intention should be to relieve the pain that G-D Himself, as it were, feels when we suffer pain. This is what the Talmud (Sanhedrin 46) says, "When a Jew suffers for his sins what does G-D say? 'I have pain in My Head! I have pain in My Arm.'"

Additionally, while many Jewish communities around the world are in distress because of CORONA, this is also a great Chillul Hashem because the non-Jews say, "Where is the Jewish G-D, who allows His chosen people to suffer?"

When a Jew prays for relief from his suffering, his intention should be to remove the Chillul Hashem that such suffering brings, and the aspect of "I (G-D) am with him in his suffering" (Tehillim 91).

Thus the verse in Shmuel Aleph ch1 states, "and Chana prayed AL HASHEM" which means Chana prayed FOR G-D! Chana meant to say that if I am suffering then surely You G-D are also suffering. So she prayed for the relief of G-D, and thereby she would also benefit.

By praying for relief from the suffering and pain of CORONA, one is attempting to reduce this Divine Pain, as it were. Such

prayer is not only permissible, but is also an essential aspect of AHAVAT HASHEM (Love of G-D), which according to Baal Hatanya is fulfilled through AHAVAT YISRAEL (Love of every Jew).

How do we demonstrate AHAVAT YISRAEL during CORONA? The answer lies in SEFIRAT HAOMER! The Counting of the Omer teaches us that we get to choose how we spend our time even in isolation. It's easy to connect to this idea now, during the CORONA lockdown.

Despite CORONA's misery, it gives us an opportunity to repair our broken society, to bridge the gap that divides us. For example, our Holy Soldiers, who were not exactly welcome in Bnei Brak, have now become heroes by delivering food parcels to infected families while risking their own health to help other Jews in distress. Perhaps this is G-d's game plan to get the Jewish people to unite and love each other despite our differences.

We have certain physical freedoms taken away from us now, but we are still in control of our time, and how we choose to use it. We count each day, to make each day count by reaching out to the lonely.

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CORONA that has put millions of people into isolation reminds us that there are people who are always socially isolated. Do we pay attention to those people who suffer from constant loneliness? These lonely people, who have no family, those who are home alone, waiting for someone to give them a kind word, do we hear their voice and feel their pain? Perhaps this virus, that forces us to become lonely, is a wakeup call to remember all the lonely people throughout the year. Loneliness can be painful, but is also easy to alleviate with a friendly smile, a kind word, and a cheerful greeting through a phone call.

These seven weeks are the bridge from Pesach, our Physical Freedom, to our Spiritual Freedom of Shavuot – the Festival of the Giving of the Torah. This is a time for personal spiritual growth, when we can overcome physical dependence and bad habits in order to self-improve.

Being in lockdown has given us the opportunity to evaluate our lives – how we spend our time, and to decipher what is really important and what we take for granted. Because we count each day for 49 days, we have a chance to reflect on our personal spiritual growth on a daily basis, to see how our lives are developing. We can evaluate day by day how we spend our time.

This SEFIRA (count) will have an important impact on our weeks, months and years for the rest of our lives.

The message is that despite CORONA we are still in control of our time and how we choose to spend it. ■