

The Flavor of Life

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

My grandchildren were by us for Shabbos, and they were chewing gum, as children are wont to do. As I watched them, I was thinking about something my rebbi, Rav Mendel Kaplan, would tell us. He would say, “Life is like chewing gum. Ah bissel tzucker un kei kei kei — It has a little sugar, but most of the time you are simply chewing.” His pithy comment is quite deep and has much meaning.

There is actually a lot packed into that little expression. Underneath the humor is a very profound observation about what life is all about.

Rav Mendel's point, as I understand it, is that we tend to imagine that life is supposed to be a succession of sweet moments. We wait for the good news, the simcha, the accomplishment, the nachas, the vacation, the special Shabbos, the wedding, the birth, the siyum. Those are the moments when we taste the “sugar.” But they are not the bulk of life because, face it, most of life is the chewing.

And that doesn't mean that most of life is bad. Chewing gum isn't bitter or unpleasant. It's simply...ordinary. You chew. You continue. You go through the day. You take care of what needs to be taken care of. You deal with the unexpected. You go to work, learn, daven, raise children, worry about things, solve problems, pay bills, make phone calls, wait for appointments, clean up messes, and do it all over again the next day.

There is a little sugar mixed in, and those moments are precious. But the sugar isn't the entirety of the gum. The chewing is the experience of living.

And perhaps that is one of the great misunderstandings of life. We think that we will really begin living when everything falls into place. When the children grow up, when the parnossah is settled, when the health is perfect, when the problem is resolved, when the simcha arrives, then life will be good.

But Rav Mendel's “ah bissel tzucker un kei kei kei” teaches something else: Don't wait for the sugar to begin appreciating the chewing.

A person is not measured only by the dramatic moments of his life. Much of avodas Hashem takes place in the seemingly uneventful actions of ordinary days. The greatness is often not in the extraordinary moment, but in getting up every day and doing what needs to be done again and again.

The kei kei kei is almost the sound of life itself.

We chew, we chew, and we keep going.

And perhaps there is an even deeper message. When you chew gum, you don't ask, “When is the next taste of sugar coming?” You know that the sweetness will eventually fade, but you continue chewing. Why? Because chewing itself has become part of the experience.

So, too, we have to learn to appreciate not only the moments when Hashem gives us an obvious taste of sweetness, but also the long stretches in between. The sweetness may be less apparent, but that doesn't mean that those moments are empty. They, too, are part of the life Hashem has given us.

Sometimes, in fact, the chewing is where the sweetness is hidden.

A person looks back after many years and realizes that the days he thought were merely "ordinary" were actually his life. The rushed mornings, the chitchat with people in shul after davening, the walks home from shul, the Shabbos meals, the conversations with his children, the learning sessions, the small acts of kindness, the challenges he overcame, even the difficulties that forced him to grow — those weren't interruptions to his life. They were his life.

Rav Kaplan managed to say all of this with a smile and a couple of words of Yiddish: Ah bissel tzucker un kei kei kei.

A little sugar.

And then you chew.

Rav Mendel was very smart. He was blessed with a life comprised of chochmas haTorah, and he sought ways to impart that chochmah to us, his young American talmidim. He was teaching us not to resent the chewing while waiting for the sugar, but rather to recognize that the sugar gives us moments of sweetness, while the chewing gives us the opportunity to live.

Life is not a bowl of cherries or a piece of candy that is sweet from beginning to end. It is chewing gum: Ah bissel tzucker un kei kei kei. There is a little sweetness, and then a great deal of chewing.

The sugar moments remind us why we are here.

We work hard at something and then are able to look back and see what we have accomplished, be it raising children and enjoying the milestones of their lives or struggling to work through a Tosafos and then experiencing the joy and sweetness of finally understanding it. Someone goes through a nisayon and later realizes that it made him stronger, deeper, and closer to Hakadosh Boruch Hu.

The chewing itself can eventually become sweet.

There is another important dimension. If we expect life to be sweet all the time, we would become disappointed very quickly. But if we understand that life is mostly chewing, with occasional bursts of sweetness, we develop a different relationship with life.

We stop asking, "Why isn't life sweeter?" and begin asking, "Where is the sugar?"

And I think that is perhaps the most beautiful way to understand Rav Kaplan's bissel tzucker.

The sugar is there. It may not be everywhere. It may not last forever. Sometimes we don't even recognize it while we're experiencing it. But it is there, and perhaps the real avodah is to learn to notice it.

Two people can live through the same day. Both have responsibilities, frustrations, bills, disappointments, and endless things to take care of. One comes home saying, "What a difficult day." The other remembers one small moment — a child's smile, a good sevara, a meaningful vort, a beautiful sunset, a kind word — and says, "Boruch Hashem, there was some sugar today."

As I get older, I think more often about Rav Mendel and his teachings and the insights he gave us when we were young and growing up. And I think about different dimensions of what he meant. Maybe that is what he meant. While it is true that life is mostly about chewing, it is also true that Hakadosh Boruch Hu makes sure that there is a little sweetness. The wise person looks for those moments and learns to savor them.

Elul is one of those doses of sugar that Hashem puts into life.

Life is filled with routine. We wake up, go to work, learn, daven, raise children, and deal with responsibilities, disappointments, and challenges. Through the "chewing" of life, we are moving forward, sometimes without even noticing how quickly the days are passing.

And then comes Elul.

Suddenly, Hashem gives us a month that is different from all the others. It is as if He puts a little sweetness into the gum and says to us, "Stop for a moment. Think about where you are going. You still have time. You can fix things. You can come closer. Ani leDodi veDodi li."

That itself is an extraordinary kindness.

The yemei hadin are approaching. A person might look at himself and think, "How can I repair everything I have done wrong?" And then Elul arrives and tells him: Come with me. You can do it.

After Tisha B'Av and the Nine Days ended, we felt as if the rest of the month of Av was one of sweetness. It represented the sugar of life we so desperately crave. It provided us with the opportunity to get off the Ferris wheel of chewing, of working, of doing the things we have to do in life. The second half of Av gave us a break, a time to go away, to travel, to unwind — a time of leisure, swimming pools, barbecues, and enjoyment.

The past three weeks represented the physical sweetness that Hashem gives life, and now we have entered the month of Elul, which presents us with some of the spiritual sweetness of life.

The sweetness of Elul is not the sweetness of comfort or pleasure. It is the sweetness of opportunity.

Elul signals that Rosh Hashanah is coming. We are being given the weeks preceding it to prepare. To think. To regret. To apologize. To improve. To strengthen a relationship. To become more careful with our words. To daven with more concentration. To learn better and more. To examine our lives

and say, "I am going to fix what I did wrong over the past year." To say, "Next year, I am going to do better."

That is the spiritual tzuker of life.

Teshuvah is not merely a painful accounting of our failures. It is the realization that we are not trapped by what we said or did yesterday. We can change it. We can change ourselves. The person I was yesterday does not have to be the person I am tomorrow. I can be better.

Elul is not meant to frighten us. It is meant to awaken us, as the posuk says, "Uru yesheinim mishinaschem." Awaken from your slumber, from your actions throughout the year. The door of teshuvah is open. The door to greatness is open. Step right in.

We can literally go back and erase yesterday. What happened, happened. The words were spoken, the opportunities were missed, the mistakes were made. Yet, Hakadosh Boruch Hu created a mechanism through which a person can take those very failures and transform their meaning. We can take those chato'im, those mistakes, and, through the gift of teshuvah, turn the failures into zechuyos, merits.

Someone who recognizes what he did wrong, sincerely regrets it, accepts upon himself not to repeat it, and changes his behavior, is no longer the same person who committed that act. His past is no longer part of his history, and it does not define his destiny.

That is an extraordinary kindness. That is the spiritual sweetness of teshuvah.

Failure can become the beginning of growth. A sin can become the source of humility. A painful experience can teach a person compassion. A relationship that was damaged can become the impetus to learn how to speak differently. A missed opportunity can awaken a person to recognize the next opportunity when it arrives.

Elul is the month when Hashem reaches out to us, when Heaven touches earth and the distance between us and our Creator becomes smaller. Hashem comes closer and offers us the precious gift of teshuvah, the opportunity to find our way back home.

We may have wandered. We may have taken wrong turns, missed exits, traveled down roads we never should have entered, and sometimes gotten so lost that we no longer know how to get back. But teshuvah is Heaven's GPS. It helps us recalculate and points us home. It reminds us that no matter how far we have traveled, the road back is still open. We are never too far gone to return. And what could be sweeter than that?

Elul isn't merely a countdown to Rosh Hashanah. It is Hashem giving us advance notice that the yemei hadin are coming and giving us the opportunity to prepare for them.

He is telling us, "Don't wait until you stand before Me to wish you had become different. Change now."

Before the King judges us, He comes closer to us and gives us a month to go looking for Him.

We have spent another year chewing. There were sweet moments, bitter moments, ordinary moments, and painful moments. There were things we did well and things we wish we could do over.

Elul provides us with the opportunity to examine the past year, fix what needs fixing, and set ourselves on a good path for the coming year. Elul enables us to build a better future.

There is a little sugar. Life is still mostly chewing. But when Elul arrives, Hashem puts a little extra sweetness into the gum. He gives us a month in which the ordinary person can become extraordinary by confronting his past, learning from it, and returning to the One who has been waiting for him all along.

We can look at it a little deeper.

The Vilna Gaon writes that when Hashem created the world, He combined the middos of din and rachamim. The world could not exist through din alone, because no human being could survive if we were judged solely according to what we deserved. However, a world governed exclusively by rachamim would lack the structure and accountability necessary for creation to fulfill its purpose. Hashem therefore conducts the world through a combination of din and rachamim.

But during Elul, Hashem relates to us strictly with the middah of rachamim. The King is coming, the yemei hadin are approaching, and yet, paradoxically, the days immediately preceding judgment are days of extraordinary mercy. Prior to standing in judgment before Him, Hashem comes toward us with rachamim and invites us to approach.

What an incredible gift that is. Imagine a person who is about to stand trial. His actions are going to be examined, and he will have to answer for the choices he has made. And then, before the trial begins, the judge goes out to meet him and says to him, "Come. Let us fix this before we start hearing the case."

That is Elul. It is a month of Divine mercy, of Divine sweetness.

Elul reminds us that our mistakes do not have to be the end of the story. Hashem gives us the extraordinary ability of teshuvah. He doesn't wait for us to come crawling back after judgment has already been rendered. He comes closer. He makes the first move. He opens the door and beckons us inside.

And suddenly, Rav Mendel Kaplan's words take on an even deeper meaning.

Life can indeed be a lot of chewing. We struggle, we stumble, we make mistakes, and we can wonder how we will find our way back. How will we get tzuker back into our lives? But then comes Elul and Hashem gives us a month of rachamim, a month when the distance between Heaven and earth is diminished, a month when the King is in the field and the road home is easier to find.

That is the sweetness of Elul. It is the sweetness of rachamim. It is the sweetness of knowing that the door is open. The sweetness of knowing that Hashem will help us get on the right path before He judges us.

May we all be zoche to come home and have a sweet year of goodness and kindness. A kesivah vachasimah tovah to all.