



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת שלח תשס"ח • Parshas Shelach 5768

IN THE EYES OF THE BEHOLDER

There are few statements that so accurately encapsulate the greater part of Jewish history as the following prayer:

הַבֵּט מִשָּׁמַיִם וּרְאֵה, כִּי הָיִינוּ לְעַג וְקֵלֶס בְּגוֹיִם, נְחַשְׁבָּנוּ כְּצֹאן לְטֶבַח יוֹבֵל, לְהַרוֹג וּלְאַבֵּד וּלְמַכּוֹת וּלְחַרְפָּהּ. וּבְכָל זֹאת שָׂמַךְ לֹא שָׁכַחְנוּ.

“Look down from the Heavens and see, that we have been an object of scorn and disdain amongst the nations. We are considered as mere sheep, designated for slaughter; to be murdered, destroyed, stricken, and humiliated. Despite all of this, we have not forgotten Your Name,” (*Tachanun for Mondays and Thursdays*).

In the face of steady harassment and degradation at the hands of our enemies, the Jewish people — for most of its history — were able to remain steadfast in their loyalty to Hashem and His Torah. Through the massacres of Crusaders and Cossacks, and the torments of sword-bearing Arab marauders, the greater part of the survivors — even the simple folk — withstood the pressures, never wavering in their allegiance to Hashem.

That is, until more recent times. The modern era has witnessed a defection from Judaism on a massive scale. The lures of assimilation have caused an unprecedented abandonment of Torah in recent centuries, to the point that few can imagine that observant Jews actually once comprised the majority of the Jewish population.

What changed?

It appears that the answer may lie in this week’s *parshah*.

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

Upon completing their reconnaissance mission in Eretz Yisrael, the spies returned to the Jewish camp to relate their findings. In their negative reporting, they included

much information to strike fear into the hearts of B’nei Yisrael. Amongst their account, they told of their encounter with the humungous *Nefilim*:

וְשָׁם רָאִינוּ אֶת הַנְּפִילִים בְּנֵי עָנָק... וַנְּהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כְּחַגָּבִים וְכֵן הָיִינוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם:

“And there we saw the *Nefilim*, children of the Giants...and we were as grasshoppers in our eyes; we were similarly perceived in their eyes,” (*Bamidbar 13:33*).

We can understand what the spies meant when they said that they were perceived as grasshoppers by the *Nefilim*; the Gemara (*Sotah 35a*) relates that the spies overheard the *Nefilim* remarking, “Hey, look at those funny-looking grasshopper-people,” when they spotted the spies. But how are we to understand the spies’ statement that they were seen as grasshoppers in their *own* eyes?

MAN AND HIS WORLD

Let us introduce a Mishnah in Sanhedrin which expresses a sentiment that will aid us in arriving at and appreciating the eventual resolution. The Mishnah (4:5) states:

לְפִיכֶן נִבְרָא אָדָם יְחִידִי, לְלַמְדֵךְ, שְׂפָל הַמְאֵבֵד נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַכְּתוּב כְּאֵלוֹ אֵבֵד עוֹלָם מְלֵא. וְכֹל הַמְקִיִּים נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַכְּתוּב כְּאֵלוֹ קַיָּם עוֹלָם מְלֵא... לְפִיכֶן כֹּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד חַיֵּב לוֹמַר, בְּשִׁבְלֵי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם.

“Man was created singularly (i.e. when Hashem created man, He did not initially create a whole group, but started with Adam HaRishon alone) for the following reason. Hashem wished to impart a vital lesson: whoever destroys a single Jew is considered to have wiped out an entire world. And whoever preserves the life of a single Jew, is considered to have saved an entire world. (Rashi explains that this principle is borne out by the fact that the entire world population is descended from a single individual: Adam HaRishon.) ...Therefore, each and every individual is obligated to

לע"נ הרב אברהם ב"ר אליעזר זצ"ל, נפטר כ"ב סיון תשל"ב

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of ר' אהרן בן בנימין ז"ל, a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his Neshamah.

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declare: ‘The world was created for my sake.’ (Rashi explains: ‘I bear the importance of an entire world’).”

Although this attitude seems to border on arrogance, the *Etz Yosef* clarifies that this sentiment is really a statement of responsibility, quite necessary for the proper service of Hashem. If a person does not recognize his true value, his actions will reflect this notion. “What’s the big deal if I waste some time from learning?” one fellow may say. “Do another few inches in my hemline here or there make a major difference in the grand scheme of things?” his wife chimes in. But if one realizes that the weight of the entire world is literally on his own shoulders, the answer to this last question will be a resounding, “Yes!” Of course it makes a difference; why, the whole world depends on it!

The Rabbeinu Yonah opens his work *Sha'arei Avodah* with the following statement: “The first step in *avodas Hashem* is that a person must be aware of his true worth.” By recognizing his immense personal value as well as his admirable and lofty qualities, he will feel compelled to act accordingly. When confronted with temptation, he will say, “How could such a noble person as myself lower my standards and stature to commit an improper act?”

On the other hand, if his self-estimation is in the gutter, his deeds will follow suit. As the Rabbeinu Yonah concludes: “Anyone who is not embarrassed of himself (and allows himself to commit misdeeds), obviously perceives himself as valueless.”

YOU ARE WHAT YOU SEE

In light of these fundamentals, the statement of the spies takes on new meaning. The *Michtav M'Eliyahu* (R' E. Dessler, quoted in *Mishulchan Gavohah, Bamidbar, p. 108*) contends that the spies’ fatal flaw was that they fell prey to what has become an unfortunate common malady: lack of proper self-esteem. “We were as grasshoppers in our eyes”; comparing themselves to the mighty giants, they felt lowly, and perceived of themselves as mere insects. And since they felt themselves to be so insignificant, they were really

awestruck and intimidated by the *Neflim*: “We were similarly perceived in their eyes.”

R' Dessler concludes that this was the fundamental difference between the earlier and later generations of Jewish history. Our predecessors knew who they were: descendants of the royal family of the Patriarchs. Every Jew was aware that he possessed a lofty soul, imbued with a spark of the Divine. Confident in their nobility of spirit, they were unfazed by the taunts and jeers of the rabble-rousers, and retained their loyalty to their Father in Heaven. This outlook was forgotten in the later years, however. Once people no longer appreciated their true self worth, their perception in the eyes of the outside world suddenly mattered greatly to them. Having lost focus of the immense value of a Jew, the pressure remained too great to bear.

As we continue to fulfill our obligation of stating, “*Bishvili nivra ha'olam* — The world was created for me,” we can rest assured that the Jewish people will continue to survive and grow.

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