



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת ויגש תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Vayigash

A SCENARIO TO AVOID

The key to living a life of near-perfection is revealed to us in the Mishnah (*Avos 3:1*):

עֲקֵבְיָא בְּוִן מְהַלְלָאֵל אוֹמֵר, הִסְתַּכַּל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְּבָרִים וְאִין אַתָּה בָּא לִיְדֵי עֲבָרָה. דַּע, מֵאִין בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, וּלְפָנֶי מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לָתֵן דִּין וְחֲשׁוֹבוֹ... לְפָנֶי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

“Said Akavya b. Mahalalel: Contemplate the following three things, and you will never stumble into sin: Know from where you came, to where you are going, and before Whom you will eventually have to give an account and reckoning (at the end of one’s life)... Before the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed is He.”

People may find that the inevitable Day of Judgment is not necessarily at the forefront of their focus. This may be a result of the *yetzer hara*’s strategy: he keeps us so occupied with the mundane affairs of this world that it becomes difficult to reflect on and clearly picture matters of spirituality (see *Mesilas Yesharim*, ch. 4). The dramatic events of this week’s *parshah*, however, provide us with a striking glimpse of the nature of that impending day. After all, the Midrash (*Bereishis Rabbah 93:10*) draws a parallel between Yosef’s admonition of his brothers to the eventual “account and reckoning” each individual will have to endure. Studying this idea may aid us in fulfilling the Mishnah’s advice of contemplating the future to perfect our deeds now.

REBUKE?

Yehudah had just completed his impassioned plea before the “Egyptian.” The minister’s goblet had

been found in the sack of Binyamin, and he was sentenced to life-long servitude. Knowing that their father would die of heartbreak if this were to occur, Yehudah begged that he be taken instead. Hoping to appeal to some latent sense of humanity in the Egyptian ruler, Yehudah beseeched the viceroy to agree to the substitution. Their father had already lost one beloved son; he would not survive the loss of Binyamin as well.

At this point the Egyptian – who was really their long-lost brother Yosef, whom the brothers had sold into slavery many years back – could no longer contain himself. With deep emotion, he uttered the famous words: “I am Yosef; is my father still alive?” (*Bereishis 45:3*) So stunned were the brothers that they were unable to answer a thing.

As gripping and familiar as this episode is, it appears to contain a patent difficulty. Yosef’s question of “Is my father still alive?” seems to be totally out of place. Yehudah had just finished explaining to Yosef that Binyamin had to be returned home, otherwise, his father would die from sorrow. Obviously, then, his father was currently alive! Surely no significant changes had taken place in the past couple of seconds!

Furthermore, as stated above, *Chazal* refer to Yosef’s self-revelation as a shocking admonition to his brothers. But where is the rebuke? All he did was ask about his father’s welfare!

DOWN THE HATCH

The following parable (based on *Talelei Oros* to Bereishis 6:12) may shed some light on the subject.

לזכר נשמת ציפא רבקה בת ברוך ע"ה

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of ע"ה אברהם וואלף בן מרדכי הלוי ע"ה a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his neshamah.

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MISHNAS
CHAYIM

משנת חיים

פרשת ויגש תשס"ט 5769 Parshas Vayigash

A hungry pelican once scooped up a sizeable fish in its pouch-like beak. As the bird prepared to swallow it, however, the fish began to plead for its life:

“Please, please have mercy,” it cried. “Do not kill one of Hashem’s creations!”

The fish’s entreaty stirred up some compassionate feelings within the pelican. He began to seriously consider returning the fish to the water. However, as the fish began to open its mouth to plead once more, something suddenly sprang out of it. To the pelican’s surprise, the object that propelled itself from the clutches of the fish’s mouth was none other than... a small fish!

“Sorry, mister,” the pelican said to the big fish. And then he swallowed.

What was the unfortunate larger fish’s undoing? His pleas may initially have sounded convincing,

but then it was revealed that he was guilty of the very thing he was beseeching the pelican not to do to him. He had been exposed as nothing more than a hypocritical fraud. And the evidence came spilling out of his very own mouth.

The Beis Halevy (*parshas Vayigash*) explains Yosef’s revelation in a very similar way. When asking, “Is my father still alive?” Yosef did not need the information; of course he knew that his father was alive. Rather, it was a rhetorical question; these few words contain a powerful rebuke. The brothers had just argued that Yosef’s actions bordered on cruelty. How could he insist on holding Binyamin; didn’t he care about the irreparable harm he was inflicting on the lad’s father? To which Yosef responded, “I am not some Egyptian official. I am Yosef, the one you snatched from the very father of whom you speak, and sold as a slave. Is my father still ‘alive’? Has he been truly *living* all of these years? It is well that you are now so concerned for his welfare; where was this concern when you stole his beloved son away from him, causing a forced separation of so many years?”

And so, explains the Beis Halevy, will it be in the future. Just as Yosef used the brothers’ own words to incriminate them, so will our own excuses be used against us. Standing in front of the Throne of Judgment, a person will be asked, for example, “Why didn’t you study Torah?”

“It was too hard for me,” he may reply. “I didn’t have the head for it.”

“Yet I see,” will come the response, “that you managed to earn a comfortable living. Apparently, you were quite able to learn a trade. Only when it came to the Word of Hashem you did not ‘have a head’?”

Like Yosef’s brothers there will be nothing to answer. By striving *now* for improvement, however, we may head off the ultimate reproof.

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