

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Beha'aloscha

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Binah *bas* Yaakov *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Treacherous Trio

The pernicious effects of excessive desire are made clear in this week's *parshah*.

Out of This World

The tragic episode begins when – as the *pasuk* tells us (*Bamidbar 11:4*) – a group of miscreants traveling with the Jews in the desert “*hisavu ta'avah*” (felt a surge of desire) – in this case, for food. They succeeded in arousing their fellow travelers to yearn and complain for meat.

“And B'nei Yisrael cried too, and they said: ‘Who will feed us beef?’” (*ibid.* v. 5).

Hashem responded by sending an abundance of quail, which they eagerly set upon and began consuming. Alas, it was really a deadly plague: “The flesh was still in between their teeth... and Hashem smote the nation with a very mighty blow,” (v. 33). The source of this tragedy was hidden in the name of the place that served as the setting for this event: “It was called ‘Kivros Hata'avah’ (Graves of the Desirous Ones) because there they buried the gluttonous people,” (v. 34).

The destructive effects of excessive greed and desire are the subject of a well-known Mishnah in *Avos* (4:21). The Mishnah lists another two traits that give rise to the same calamitous outcome:

“Rebbi Elazar Hakappar says: Jealousy, desire, and (the pursuit of) glory remove a man from the world.”

It is almost tragically fascinating to observe how each of these characteristics can drive an individual to act in ways diametrically opposed to logic. Often, the result of these tendencies is serious and damaging self-inflicted wounds. In fact, as the *Medrash Shmuel* (commentary to *Avos*) explains, this is the very meaning of “being removed from the world.” A person devoid of common sense is no longer considered to be a functional member of society; it is as if he has passed on from the scene.

Chazal demonstrate how an individual infected with these *middos ra'os* (negative traits) reaches the heights of irrationality – even when the result is to his own irreparable detriment.

When Envy and Desire Do Battle

(The following example is based on a portrayal related in the medieval classic *Mivchar Hapeninim*, attributed to R' Shlomo ibn Gabirol. It is referenced in *Magen Avos*, the commentary of the Tashbatz to *Maseches Avos*.)

A *ba'al ta'avah* (someone subservient to his base desires and greed) and a *ba'al kinah* (jealous person) were brought before the king and presented with a most unusual offer. They could wish for anything – and it would be granted immediately.

Needless to say, the offer would be tantalizing for anyone. The two immediately began fantasizing, trying to conjure up a picture of their ultimate heart's desire, which – in a few moments – would be granted by this

benevolent king.

There was one caveat, however. The king informed them that only one of them would get to choose what this priceless gift would be. The other would not lose out, however, as he would be awarded double. In other words, the one to choose first would have the privilege of determining the exact composition of the gift, which would be granted on the spot. His friend, however, would then receive a double share.

Immediately, the two were thrown into a state of bewildered agony; neither of them wanted to go first. For the jealous guy, the thought that his colleague could come out with twice as much gave him no rest. For his part, the *ba'al ta'avah* was not much better off. While he did not begrudge someone else being greater or wealthier than he, the mere fact that there was an option of receiving a “double portion” was extremely disconcerting. If there was more to be had out there, he badly wanted to get his hands on it.

In short, this was the vexing dilemma that faced the two: neither felt they could choose first. The *ba'al kinah* couldn't bear the thought of his friend walking out with more than himself; the *ba'al ta'avah* felt there was no way he could forego the opportunity of receiving double the pickings.

The king was insistent and growing impatient. Finally, the *ba'al ta'avah* prevailed upon his companion the *ba'al kinah* to choose first. The moment of truth had come.

“Have you settled upon a wish?” the king asked the envious one.

“Yes,” he replied.

“You do realize that the other will receive double the amount?” the king remarked.

“That is correct,” came the response.

“And so, what is your wish? It will be immediately granted, according to the conditions we have laid out.”

“Your Majesty,” answered the jealous man, “I request that you gouge out *one* of my eyeballs.”

Giving It All Away – for Nothing

Pride and the desire for the ultimate glory are no less detrimental for the decision-making process. This is illustrated by Chazal's depiction of Yeravam ben Nevat, the Biblical figure who became the king of Israel and had the opportunity to achieve true greatness. The Gemara in Sanhedrin (*102a*) relates a conversation Hashem had with this king:

Hakadosh Boruch Hu said to Yeravam: “Repent from your misdeeds. If you do so, you will merit tremendous reward. Together – I, you, and (Dovid) the son of Yishai – will stroll in Gan Eden.”

“Who will be in front?” asked Yeravam. “I or Yishai's son?”

“The son of Yishai will go first,” Hashem answered.

“If so,” replied Yeravam, “I am not interested.”

The lesson of the *parshah* and the Mishnah could not be clearer: take care to get a hold of these dangerous

tendencies before they get a hold of you.