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## This Week's Parshah - Parshas Beha'aloscha

Kindly take a moment to study <u>MISHNAS CHAYIM</u> in the merit of Natalie *bas* Avrohom *a"h* a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah* 

## The Physical Spiritual Reward

The Torah in this week's *parshah* displays a high regard for humility, as evidenced by a focus on this trait in its laudatory comments of Moshe Rabbeinu: "And the man Moshe was very humble – more than any person on the face of the earth" (*Bamidbar 12:3*).

Indeed, we find something of "extreme" language regarding this topic, more so than in discussions of other qualities. A prime example comes from the Mishnah in Avos (4:4):

ַרַבִּי לְוִיטַס אִישׁ יַבָנָה אוֹמֶר, מָאֹד מָאֹד הָוֵי שָׁפַל רוּחַ, שַׁתַּקוַת אֵנוֹשׁ רָמָה.

"R' Levitas, Man of Yavneh says: Be very, very humble; for man is destined for the worms."

Why, in fact, are such strong exhortations reserved for this trait in particular? The language suggests that the absence of this quality is not just undesirable, but downright dangerous.

## **Depleting Merits**

The Chofetz Chaim sheds light on the acute concern. The prospect of lacking this attribute presents an inherent threat. Those who think too highly of themselves often crave and seek glory and engage in self-aggrandizement; these elements are quite damaging indeed, as shall be demonstrated. The harm stems from a certain quality associated with the attainment of kovod (honor), which is unique amongst all other worldly acquisitions.

When a person acquires material gain of some sort, his store of merits (that have been accrued through the righteous deeds he has performed) may very likely remain unaffected. This is because, quite simply, there is absolutely nothing in this world that could possibly serve as a commensurate reward for a mitzvah act. *Mitzvos* are spiritual entities; as such, recompense for them in the form of material wealth would be like paying an employee's salary with Monopoly® money. Shlomo Hamelech tells us: "If a person gives away his estate's entire fortune in exchange for 'ahavah' (love; a reference to Torah), they will heap scorn upon him," (*Shir Hashirim* 8:7). Considering the world's riches as appropriate compensation for the fulfillment of even a single mitzvah – in the eyes of the Torah – is a ridiculous proposition.

As such – the Chofetz Chaim explains – receiving some earthly benefit, such as wealth, does not (generally speaking) deplete one's merits, since the (physical) gain in no way matches the nature of the mitzvah act, which is purely spiritual. (In fact, it is for this reason, the Ramban explains, that the Torah does not explicitly elaborate on the reward awaiting the righteous in the Afterlife. As there is no comparable model amongst all of the delights of this world, it is simply not possible to describe the reward in terms that mortals could comprehend. "No eye – other than Yours, Hashem – has beheld what You bestow upon those who look to You" [Yeshayah 64:3].)

There is, however, one exception -kovod. Honor and approval are unique in that they are elements that most people desire, expend great sums to obtain, and often pursue strenuously and consistently. Inherently, however,

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glory is not exactly a physical object or material entity. Rather, this intangible phenomenon is more appropriately classified in the "spiritual" category.

This is why Chazal urge us so vociferously to distance ourselves from self-aggrandizement, adopting instead a "very, very humble" approach, essentially relinquishing any designs or desires for obtaining accolades. Since *kovod* does have a spiritual kind of quality, it is the only item in this world that could conceivably serve as a form of recompense for spiritual mitzvah acts. Anytime one does attain some glory in this world – as ephemeral as it is – it comes at the expense of his spiritual "bank account." By thus depleting his merits, he exchanges blissful, eternal honor for some essentially meaningless and temporary glory.

## Fleeing from Honor

This is a major factor governing the practice of many of our righteous figures who eschewed any manner of receiving honor. In particular, the Chofetz Chaim was an excellent paradigm of what he preached in this regard. One well-known example entails a certain occurrence that is somewhat well known (but often related with some inaccuracies to illustrate a principle of dubious veracity). It is recorded here based on the account of R' Shmuel Greineman – a close attendant and confidante of the Chofetz Chaim himself – and demonstrates the extent to which the sage had shed the whole notion of self-aggrandizement from his psyche.

It so happened that one time while travelling by train, the Chofetz Chaim was approached by one of his fellow travellers; the latter did not recognize his illustrious companion. The two got to talking, and when the fellow learned that his newfound "friend" was from the town of Radin, the conversation took a predictable turn.

"Oh, so you must know the Chofetz Chaim who resides there. They say that he is a tremendous *tzaddik* (righteous man)," the man remarked. But his companion answered simply, "No, it's a myth. I know him, and he's just a regular Jew."

The man was outraged at such insolence – denigrating the Chofetz Chaim! He tried to press the point, but his companion would not change his tune. "No, I know him; he's just regular."

Astounded, the man could no longer contain his righteous fury. And so he unleashed a torrent of condemnation on this traveller from Radin who obviously did not appreciate the treasure that dwelled in his midst. Imagine his surprise when the train pulled up at the next stop, and those now boarding suddenly converged upon this ("insolent") Jew to greet him and elicit his blessing!

In the midst of the tumult, the man discovered the true identity of his travelling companion, and his face was covered with shame. He turned to the Chofetz Chaim with tears in his eyes. "Rebbi, please forgive me," he cried. "I... I didn't know..."

In all earnestness, the Chofetz Chaim was perplexed. "For what do you need to ask forgiveness? Presumably, you feel bad for the way you treated 'the Chofetz Chaim'; but you feel bad because you thought I was a *tzaddik*! It's not your fault that you were given misinformation. Now that I've clarified for you that I'm not really a *tzaddik* – what do you have to feel bad about?"