

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Blima *bas* Ya'akov Simchah *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

It Depends How You Look at It

PARSHAS SHEMOS 5777

When we contemplate the “olden times,” we may do so with a sense of ambivalence. On the one hand, we tend to look with astonishment on the backwardness and inconveniences that characterized life back then, without the technological advances of modern times. On the other hand, the world seemed to have possessed a certain wholesomeness and innocence that appears so elusive in our “sophisticated” society.

Perhaps reflective of this sentiment is the account related by R' Ya'akov Galinsky regarding a certain arrangement that prevailed in the European town of his childhood. There lived there a number of upright but illiterate homemakers, who would learn the goings-on of the world from the one literate member of the group. This was none other than R' Ya'akov's mother, who received the daily paper (also much more wholesome and decent than most contemporary ones). The neighborhood ladies would gather in Rebbetzin Galinsky's home, where she would read them the paper and relay the news of the day.

It happened one time that one of the members of this clutch arrived a few minutes early. The hostess was still busy with kitchen work, and so to pass the time, the early arrival began to “peruse” the paper on her own. She took one look at the paper, however, and let out a cry of horror.

“How can you peel potatoes with all of this going on?!” she called out to the Rebbetzin. The latter was somewhat taken aback; she had glanced at the paper earlier and could not recall having seen anything too out of the ordinary. Entering the room, she asked her guest what the commotion was all about.

“Didn't you see this tragedy?” she replied, pointing to the paper. “Look! A huge ocean-liner has sunk in the sea! Imagine how many people must have drowned!”

The Rebbetzin had to hold back a smile. Taking the paper from the illiterate woman, she calmly explained: “No, no, no. You're holding it upside down. See,” she continued, as she turned it upright. “The ship didn't sink. This is an article announcing the maiden voyage of a new ship. This is not a picture of the ship's tragic sinking; on the contrary, it portrays the celebration and fanfare as it sets out on its first journey!”

Beneath the Surface

R' Yitzchak Zilberstein, who recorded this account (*Barchi Nafshi, parshas Shemos*), derives from it a most powerful life lesson. Every individual, to one extent or another, is confronted with challenges and difficulties. Not surprisingly, many succumb to feeling discouraged and miserable in such situations, as they wonder why such misfortune befell them. And while not an uncommon reaction, it nevertheless does not conform with the outlook mandated for a true *ma'amin* (believer). That is, it only *appears* to us as misfortune; but if we would cultivate a real sense of *bitachon* (trust in Hashem), we would come to understand that what happened is actually to our benefit and not to our detriment. As Chazal tell us: כֹּל דְּעָבִיד רַחֲמֵינָא לְטַב עָבִיד – “All that Hashem does is (ultimately) for the best” (*Berachos 60b*). This is also the basic message of the Mishnah in *Berachos* (9:5), which states:

חַיֵּב אָדָם לְבָרֵךְ עַל הַרְעָה כְּשֶׁם שֶׁהוּא מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַטּוֹבָה, שְׁנֹאמֵר (דְּבָרִים ו) וְאַהֲבֵת אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לֵבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֻדְךָ... בְּכָל מְאֻדְךָ, בְּכָל מִדָּה וּמִדָּה שֶׁהוּא מוֹדֵד לְךָ הָי מוֹדָה לוֹ.

“A person is obligated to bless on misfortune, just as he blesses on success, as the verse states (*Devarim 6:5*), ‘You shall love Hashem, your G-d, with all of your heart, all of your soul, and all of your means...’ All of your means (*me’odecha*) implies that one should praise Hashem in response to any measure (*middah*) that befalls a person.”

This may seem like somewhat of a “tall order” for many people. But the real reason we view these events in a negative light is because, in effect, we are viewing the picture upside down. Thus we see suffering and challenges as mere painful, unhappy experiences. If we could somehow place matters in the proper perspective – by strengthening our faith and cultivating real *bitachon* – we could then “bless on the misfortunes as on success.”

Fortuitous Events

This notion, continues R’ Zilberstein, is on stark display throughout the narrative of the Egypt experience, beginning in this week’s *parshah*.

In fact, we find this idea mentioned explicitly in the Torah, right from the start. Pharaoh unleashed on Yisrael the torment of servitude; seemingly, this is an event that can only be characterized as irredeemably malevolent. Consider, however, the immediate effects; as the *passuk* attests: וַיִּכְבְּדוּהוּ וַיִּבְרְכוּהוּ וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ וַיִּבְרְכוּהוּ וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ – “And as they oppressed (Yisrael), so would they multiply and increase” (*Shemos 1:12*). What on the surface appeared to be purely detrimental was in fact responsible for the building of Klal Yisrael (the greater body of the nation of Yisrael).

We could focus, as well, on the individual example of Moshe Rabbeinu. At one point, his life was in mortal danger. Moshe had slain an Egyptian for striking an innocent Jewish laborer, and the matter reached the ears of Pharaoh. To put it mildly, this gave rise to a most inconvenient situation for Moshe: וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהַרְגוֹ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מִפְּנֵי מֹשֶׁה מִצְרָיִם – “And Pharaoh heard of this matter, and he sought to kill Moshe; and Moshe fled from Pharaoh’s presence” (*ibid. 2:15*). But what arose from this circumstance? Moshe ended up settling in Midyan, where he acquired a wife. And it was there, in the house of Yisro, that he discovered the “*mateh Elokim*” (staff of G-d) with which he would perform the wonders and miracles that brought about Yisrael’s deliverance.

And so, when viewed “right-side-up,” we see that these were not misfortunes, but fortuitous and blessed events.

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