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Leah *bas* Osher *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

In Praise of Shoes

PARSHAS KI SISA 5778

Many times throughout Tanach we find that the qualities of Yisrael are extolled in various ways. But one unique example of praise occurs in connection with one of the *mitzvos* contained in this week’s *parshah* – namely, *aliyah l’regel* (ascension to the Temple on the Pilgrimage Festivals). The *passuk* in Shir Ha’shirim (7:2) states: מְהִיפוּ פְעָמֵיךָ בְּנִעְלָיִם – “How lovely are your footsteps while wearing shoes.” And Chazal attribute this to the pilgrims: “How lovely are the feet of Yisrael at the time that they perform *aliyah l’regel!*” (*Chagigah 3a*). It certainly seems like an interesting form of praise. Yisrael could have been lauded simply for making the journey; why the particular focus on their feet and their footwear?

R’ Shlomoh Zalman Auerbach clarifies this matter by depicting what the journey of an average pilgrim might look like. As we shall see, the overall endeavor can be divided into two primary phases.

The Journey and the Struggle

Now, it is no simple matter for a person to set out on such an excursion in the first place. After all, he is leaving behind his entire estate, with all of his wealth and possessions, essentially unguarded and open to plunder over the course of his absence. Recall, as well, that we are speaking of the days in which travel was a particularly long and drawn-out affair, which means that his premises would be unsecured for an extended period of time. Furthermore, there was no advanced technology in the way of alarm-systems, security cameras, and the like. One who set out on such a journey thus left all of his lands and livestock potentially vulnerable to any envious and unscrupulous eyes.

Of course, the Torah itself addresses this very concern in the *parshah*. As the *passuk* states: לֹא יִחַמַּד אִישׁ אֶת-אֲרָצְךָ בְּעֵלְתָךָ לְרֵאוֹת אֶת-פָּנַי ד' אֶלְקֶיךָ שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה – “No man shall covet your land when you ascend to appear before the Presence of Hashem your G-d (during the) three times of the year” (*Shemos 34:24*). So a person is granted a guarantee that no harm shall befall the possessions he leaves behind; and as long as his *bitachon* (reliance on Hashem) remains strong, he indeed will feel no pangs of worry. But then again, the average individual might not yet have reached the highest levels of *bitachon*... As he goes on the way, he tries to reassure himself, repeating the Torah’s promise; but then he remembers that the entirety of his “life’s savings” is left at home, open to marauders... But then there’s the promise...

And so it goes. He travels; he becomes filled with worry; perhaps he hesitates, even feels a compulsion to turn around and go back... But then his intellect overpowers his emotions, he resumes his journey, goes another few miles... The worries return... He starts and stops, then starts up again... Until finally, he reaches Yerushalayim and beholds the Har Habayis (Temple Mount).

This is the first phase of his journey.

The Differences

Now, as he enters the environs of the Beis Hamikdash (Holy Temple), he undergoes a substantial transformation. In close proximity to the Shechinah (Divine Presence), which rests at this site, and viewing the grandeur of the Beis Hamikdash, he experiences an uplifting feeling of closeness and elevation. At this point, amidst the lofty spectacle tinged with the sounds of prayer and praise of the Almighty, he is transported to another, better world. Thoughts of vineyards and monetary worries are the farthest thing from his mind.

Aside from the shift in mindset, there is another stark difference between these two phases of the excursion. This second distinction is a *halachic* matter, as entry into the Temple area requires the removal of some of his travelling accoutrements. As delineated in the Mishnah in Berachos (9:5):

לא יָכִינס לְהַר הַבַּיִת בְּמַקְלוֹ וּבְמִנְעָלוֹ וּבַפְּנִידָתוֹ וּבְאַבְקַת שְׁעַל רַגְלָיו.

“One may not enter the Har Habayis with his staff, his shoes, his money belt, or with dust upon his feet.”

Now, if we were to be asked which of the two phases of the journey should be considered the loftier one, we would almost invariably point to the culmination. After all, upon entering the vicinity of the Beis Hamikdash, as we have seen, the pilgrim is enveloped in a form of spiritual ecstasy. This is quite a contrast to the mundane phase of the trip, when he was preoccupied with thoughts of fields and material possessions.

However – as we mentioned at the outset – Chazal inform us otherwise, for they attributed to this mitzvah the praise uttered in Shir Ha’shirim: מַה יָפֹוּ פְעָמֶיךָ בְּנִעָלִים – “How lovely are your footsteps **while wearing shoes.**” That is, it is the first phase of the journey – before arriving at the Temple, and undertaken while wearing shoes – that is considered most dear in the eyes of Hashem. As R’ Shlomo Zalman explains, it is specifically that aspect of the mitzvah that entailed a struggle – in which the servant of Hashem had to continuously prod himself, strengthen himself, and then forge onward – that Hashem so greatly values. Of course, when he arrived at the Beis Hamikdash, he was treated to an elevated spiritual experience; but at the same time, this portion of his pilgrimage did not entail much of a trial.

And so it is with regard to all aspects of our *avodas Hashem* (service of Hashem). We see from the above that it is the struggle and the tribulations a person undergoes that truly make him great and raise his spiritual level in Hashem’s eyes (R’ Yitzchak Zilberstein, *Barchi Nafshi, parshas Balak*).

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