

# MASTERS OF THE OBVIOUS

*by Rabbi Label Lam*

Since the land is Mine, no land shall be sold permanently. You are foreigners and resident aliens as far as I am concerned. (Vayikra 25:23)

The Sefer Chovos HaLevavos offers thirty points to ponder in a chapter entitled The Gate of Introspection- Shaar Cheshbon HaNefesh. In the thirtieth of those notions he suggests that a person should he see himself and behave like a stranger in a foreign land. This is not only an exercise in imagination. It's an orientation to reality that requires recognition, acceptance, and some real adjustment, because "you are foreigners and resident aliens". A person should be preparing and readying himself to exit at any time and therefore "he needs to think about his up and coming journey and the provisions he will need for the way." He should feel that he is absolutely dependent upon and forever grateful for the good graces of his Host, to Whom he is willfully duty-bound.

The question is why does the Chovos HaLevavos have to remind us to meditate on such an obvious fact of life? The question can best be answered with another question, "Is it so obvious to all?"

The Talmud tells us a curious idea. "If somebody informs you that a certain person died, you should not be surprised. If somebody tells you that a certain person became rich you should be surprised." What is the Talmud teaching us here? I heard that Rabbi Aaron Kotler ztl. explained that the Talmud is coming to counter the mindset of the average man in the street-Daas Baal HaBatim. How so? How do people usually react to these two types of news flashes? When people hear about the death of someone, not even necessarily close, they are shocked, "I just saw him last week!" He looked good! I thought he was getting better!" We generally find it difficult to immediately and completely assimilate the totality and finality of the information. It breaks our categorical boxes. It rocks our reality. However, when we hear that so and so became a wealthy man; that he hit it big, we lean back with a smile and a big "aha!" "I knew he had it in him! He always had that magical Mazel touch in everything he did!"

Now let's gain a penetrating insight into the real human condition with a few curt questions. What percentage of people will eventually die? You guessed it! 100%! Now what percentage of people do you estimate are likely to become wealthy? Who knows? It's something way shy of 100%. Even 5%, might be a generous and hopeful number. So why are people shocked and overawed and suffering from cognitive dissonance when the harsh news lands? And why are we less impressed by the news of someone's good fortune? The answer is that many are dreaming and fantasizing about great and sudden wealth even though it is a highly improbable event and yet we tend to live out our lives daily

in "denial of death", whistling past the inevitable and unavoidable destiny of the graveyard.

The story is told that a businessman made his way from America to the modest city of Radin in order to visit the famed Chofetz Chaim. When the Chofetz Chaim welcomed him in he was amazed to discover that this great man's home was so barely furnished. He asked the sainted Rabbi, "Where's your furniture?" The Chofetz Chaim countered with a question, "Where's yours?" The man answered with wonderment, "Rabbi, I'm a traveler and I'm just passing through!" The Chofetz Chaim retorted, "I too am just passing through."

The Talmud said what it said to sober us and bring us to our senses. Perhaps that's why the Chovos HaLevavos recommends that we focus our attention on and force ourselves to become masters of the obvious!

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