

LEARNING FROM THE ANT

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King Shlomo writes in Mishlei (6:6), "Go to the ant, lazy one; see its ways and become wise. For it has no commander, policeman or ruler, yet it prepares its bread in the summer and stores away its food at the harvest." R' Yehoshua ibn Shuiv z"l (Spain; 14th century) explains that this verse teaches two important lessons, one relating to the body and one to the soul.

First, man must make appropriate efforts to provide for his own needs. One should avoid laziness and practice diligence. Our Sages have taught: If you make an effort, you will be blessed; otherwise, you will not. At the same time, one may not take pride in his wealth because even diligence is unavailing without G-d's blessing.

Second, this verse teaches that man must prepare provisions in this life for the World-to-Come. One must be diligent about this, for one does not know when he will run out of time. This is why our Sages taught: Repent one day before you die, which means every day, for one never knows when he will die. Moreover, even if one did know how long he has, should he therefore waste his best years?

R' ibn Shuiv continues: To accomplish the above goals, Hashem gave us three types of intelligence, referred to in the fourth Berachah of Shemoneh Esrei as "De'ah," "Binah" and "Haskel." These refer respectively to the ability to understand nature, the ability to understand the Torah, and the ability to attain prophecy. These are alluded to as well in our Parashah by the mitzvah to appoint a king to deal with worldly matters, the Mitzvah to appoint a Sanhedrin to decide Torah matters, and the Mitzvah to obey a prophet. (Derashot R"Y ibn Shuiv)

"Judges and officers you shall appoint for yourself in all your cities [literally, 'your gates'] -- which Hashem, your Elokim, gives you -- for your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not pervert judgment, you shall not show favoritism [literally, 'you shall not recognize faces'], and you shall not accept a bribe, for the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise and make just words crooked. Righteousness, righteousness you shall pursue . . ." (16:18-20)

R' Avraham Shrentzel Rappaport z"l (1584-1651; rabbi of Lvov, Poland) interprets these verses as follows:

"Judges and officers you shall appoint for yourself" -- Before you judge others, judge and police yourself.

"For your tribes" -- Go in the ways of your forefathers.

"And they shall judge the people with righteous judgment" -- Only after you have judged and policed yourself will you be able to judge others properly.

"You shall not pervert judgment, you shall not recognize faces" --The Zohar teaches that Moshe Rabbeinu could read a person's innocence or guilt on his face. You, however, should not attempt this.

"And you shall not accept a bribe, for the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise" -- One who accepts a bribe certainly cannot tell who is righteous or wicked, since he himself is wicked.

"And make just words crooked" -- Even words that, standing alone, are correct become crooked when the person uttering them has accepted a bribe.

Alternatively, he writes, ***"You shall not recognize faces"*** supports the observation made by Rambam z"l and other early authorities that the fairest judge is one who knows neither of the litigants. If you follow this rule, then ***"Righteousness, righteousness you will pursue."*** (Eitan Ha'ezrachi)

"You shall not accept a bribe, for the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise and make just words crooked." (16:19)

Rashi z"l writes: "Even if you mean to give a just judgment."

R' Malachi Hakohen z"l (rabbi of Livorno, Italy; died 1772) writes: Rashi's interpretation is necessitated by the end of the verse because, if the bribe-taker is not interested in judging justly, it makes no sense to warn him that "the bribe will blind the eyes of the wise . . ." (Yad Malachi: Beur Al Ha'Torah)

"You shall arise and ascend to the place that Hashem, your G-d, shall choose." (17:8)

Rashi quotes a Midrash: "This [the word 'ascend'] teaches that the Temple was situated higher than all other places."

R' Elya Meir Bloch z"l (1894-1955; founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe in Cleveland) observes: Of course we know that there are taller mountains than Har Ha'moriah, where the Temple stood. What the Midrash means is that because the earth is a sphere, any point can be designated as "the highest point." Har Ha'moriah deserves that designation because it is the holiest point in the world, and it is

the place to which all people ascend to experience spiritual growth. (Peninei Da'at)

"It shall be that when you draw near to the war, the Kohen shall approach and speak to the people. He shall say to them, 'Shema / Hear, Yisrael, you are coming near to the battle against your enemies; let your heart not be faint; do not be afraid, do not panic, and do not be broken before them'." (20:2-3)

A Midrash interprets the Kohen's words as follows: "Even if the only merit that you have is that you recite Shema Yisrael, you deserve to be victorious."

R' Yehoshua Rokeach z"l (1825-1894; Belzer Rebbe) asks: We read (in verse 8 below), "The officers shall continue speaking to the people and say, 'Who is the man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, and let him not melt the heart of his fellows, like his heart'." Our Sages interpret this verse as addressing those who are afraid of being punished for the sins they committed--even [something seemingly as minor as] speaking between putting on the Tefilin Shel Yad and the Tefilin Shel Rosh. But, if Bnei Yisrael deserve to be victorious even if their only merit is the recitation of Kri'at Shema, why should they fear their sins?

He explains: Verse 3 contains the words of the Kohen, while verse 8 contains the words of the officers. These functionaries have different roles. The Kohen's job is to pray for Bnei Yisrael; therefore, he must instill love of the Jewish People in his own heart by focusing on their merits, no matter how few those may be. Officers, on the other hand, must lead and direct the people; therefore, they must warn them regarding the smallest infraction.

In a similar vein, R' Alter Chaim Levinson z"l (a communal activist in the time of R' Yehoshua Rokeach) adds that he once came to Belz during the month of Elul to discuss with the Belzer Rebbe proposed solutions to certain breaches in religious standards, but the Rebbe refused to see him. R' Levinson was perplexed, because the Rebbe's door was usually open to him. He shared his confusion with R' Yissachar Dov Rokeach z"l (1851-1926; son and successor of the Rebbe), and the latter explained that during Elul, when the Rebbe was focused on praying for the welfare of the Jewish People, he did not wish to hear about the breaches in society. (Quoted in Igra D'bei Hilula p.88)

Elul

R' Yisrael Salanter z"l (1810-1883; founder of the Mussar movement) writes: When it comes to the steps that man takes to fulfill his physical needs--making money, attaining honor, etc.--the first cause (at least to man's eyes, though really everything comes from the true "First Cause") is a desire for that thing. From there flow intermediate causes, which lead to other intermediate causes, until, eventually, man's desire is realized. Or, the first cause (again, to man's eyes) may be pressure or persuasion applied by another person, followed by other causes, as above.

R' Salanter continues: What is the "first cause" that leads man to examine his deeds and to focus on mussar during the month of Elul (or all year long)? There is no natural desire for this, unlike the desire for physical things! Our Sages were worried by this question. Therefore, based on a Midrash, they established the blowing of the shofar during Elul. That is the "first cause" meant to awaken a person from his slumber and from his busy routine to inspect his deeds, as the verse says (Amos 3:6): "Is the shofar ever sounded in a city and the people do not tremble?" (Ohr Yisrael no.7)

R' Meir Chodosh z"l (Mashgiach Ruchani in several Israeli yeshivot; 1898-1989) elaborates: R' Yisrael Salanter is teaching that everything is acquired in its own unique way. And, there is a prerequisite to finding that way, which is the desire to acquire that thing.

When the "thing" to be acquired is Yir'at Shamayim / fear or awe of G-d, there is no natural desire to acquire it. The road is long, and man is mired in his routine, which causes his heart to move farther and farther away from desiring Yir'at Shamayim. The walls between man and his Creator are high, and on every occasion when a person becomes aware of his obligation in this world (which is to attain closeness to Hashem), it seems distant and unattainable. Also, man has an unlimited number of excuses to justify himself. And, he has nothing to build on, because even the Yir'at Shamayim that he acquired in his youth becomes routine.

These concerns should be on a person's mind all year long as they affect his Divine service, but even more so in Elul, when a person prepares to stand in judgment before his Creator. (Meir Netivot: Mo'adim p.27)