

CEDING CONTROL

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

As Moshe beseeched G-d to restore His closeness and intimacy with the Children of Israel after the Sin of the Golden Calf, he appealed for a greater insight into the G-d's ways. "And now, if I have indeed found favor in your eyes, make your ways known to me that I may know you..." (Shemos/Exodus 33:13)

The Talmud (Tractate Yevamos 7) expounds that Moshe sought to answer the question that has been asked throughout the generations: Why does bad befall the righteous and why do the evil experience good fortune? In general, we find ourselves looking at others and wondering why one businessman succeeds and another - by all appearances equally astute, equally kind, and equally righteous - fails. We are even more unnerved when the one who fails is more virtuous. We are frustrated, even angered, by the apparent injustice of it all.

The Chofetz Chaim (1) pondered the visit of a traveler at a guesthouse. In the morning, as the guest prepares to leave and return to his travels, he berates the proprietor for the furniture arrangements around the residence: the heat is too close to the beds, the closet and dresser are on the wrong walls and numerous other such criticisms of planning decisions. The owner replies, "My dear guest, you have never been here before and you came to spend one evening. You expect to be able to intuitively understand all the rationales for the decisions I have made in establishing this inn, and to then submit the requisite corrections for all that you believe I have done wrong? Your limited experience does not equip you with the breadth of view to make substantive recommendations that I should implement."

Rabbi Kagan explains that we in our lifetimes are travelers. In the spectrum of history we are here for a few fleeting moments, yet we insist on having all the answers. Were we to live for a span of centuries with an awareness of every event, conversation and experience in people's lives we might begin to understand the sequence of events. We would see the family blessed with generations of wealth - funds they used so selflessly for chesed (kindnesses), tzedaka (charity) and beautification of mitzvah observances - lose it as an opportunity to strengthen their G-d consciousness. Meanwhile, the family that lived so faithfully through generations of poverty finds itself grappling with the reality of an unexpected windfall. But without the generations of perspective and the knowledge of the minutiae of the lives of all the involved parties, there is no way for us to even begin to contemplate why G-d presents each person with his lot in life.

This reality is not only relevant to viewing other people's lives, but is germane to appreciating the travails of one's own existence. Rabbi Avrohom Pam (2) related the story of a Jew who, in spite of

having lived his entire life in dire poverty, remained steadfast in his faith, and prayed with intense concentration. Someone once overheard this man reciting the morning blessing, "Blessed are You...who has provided me my every need," with great joy. Asked the passerby, "Can you really say that your every need has been provided for? You are among the poorest of the poor!" The man replied, "Can one really know, on his own, what his particular needs are? If G-d has made me poor, then obviously this condition is necessary for me to fulfill my purpose in life. Poverty is what my soul needs, and I have been granted this in full measure!"

Man has immense difficulty relinquishing control over aspects of his own life, no less conceding a complete lack of control of the circumstances of his life and those around him. But there is one facet over which we DO have complete and absolute control: our response to those circumstances. Every person's affairs are personally tailored by the Master of the Universe to facilitate the growth he needs to maximize his spiritual potential; our responses determine the growth we glean from each of these experiential opportunities. The more we focus on our charge and trust G-d to manage His realm, the greater we will grow and the happier we will be.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan of Radin; 1838-1933; author of basic works in Jewish law, philosophy and ethics and renowned for his saintly qualities

(2) 1913-2001; for some six decades, as Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Yeshiva Torah VoDaas in Brooklyn, New York, he was an anchor for thousands of students deeply attached to him with strong bonds of love; he was known for his outstanding diligence in Torah study, as well as for his work on his character and his study of mussar.