

TOWARDS WHAT END?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Because of this, those that speak in parables say: come to Cheshbon; it is [re-]built and established as the city of Sichon." [21:27]

This is very unusual - I know of no other place in the Torah where we find a similar reference to a history or lesson being told by storytellers! Perhaps as a result, the Talmud interprets the verse very differently than its simple translation.

"Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rebbe Yochanan, 'what is the meaning of [this verse]? "HaMoshlim" [which we translated "story-tellers", also means "rulers"] - these are those who rule over their inclinations. [What do they say?] "Come to Cheshbon" [which means "calculation" in Hebrew] - come, and let us make the world's [ultimate] calculation: the loss involved in doing a Mitzvah vs. its gain, and the gain involved in doing a transgression vs. its loss. "Built and established" [can be read as "you build and establish"] - if you do this, you will build in this world, and establish for the World to Come.'" [Bava Basra 78b]

In Jewish thought, an individual is seen as under two contradictory influences: the "good inclination" and "bad inclination". Apparently this is not all that different from the id - super-ego - ego model, but not being a psychologist, I spent a good deal of time considering these concepts; now, they're axiomatic. The "bad" inclination is the one always trying to get you to satisfy yourself with the "here and now", while the "good" inclination looks for far more spiritual, long-term joys. If you want to know the difference, I heard the following general rule from Rabbi Ezriel Tauber: if you want desperately to do it beforehand, and regret (or feel nothing) afterwards, that was probably the "bad" inclination. If you had to drag yourself to do it, but feel _happy_ with yourself afterwards, that was the "good" inclination. Works every time.

Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzato, in his "Path of the Just," understands the above Talmudic explanation as not only a single guideline, but as a call for repetitive calculations about our actions - in order to see which inclination is responsible for them. Today, time-management courses all advise setting out your schedule on paper, to see how _efficiently_ you spend your time; the Path of the Just asks, "towards what ends?"

The two analyses actually work well together - if you write down your actions over the course of a

day, that alone is a push to act both efficiently and responsibly. Then, at the end of the day, you can see how well you're doing (in all ways) and how you can improve.

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